

LEADING THE NIGHT



Philo Ikonya

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

Leading the Night

Philo Ikonya



"Working Towards a Better World"

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

© Philo Ikonya, 2010

Published in 2010 by:
Twaweza Communications Ltd.
P.O. Box 66872 - 00800 Westlands
Twaweza House, Parklands Road
Mpesi Lane, Nairobi Kenya
website: www.twawezacommunications.org
Tel: +(254) 020 375 2009

Design and Layout by Catherine Bosire
Cover design by Kolbe Press

ISBN: **978-9966-1510-0-1**

Printed by Kolbe Press, P.O. Box 468 - 00217 Limuru, Kenya

Dancing snakes

Leafing through The Sabat News, Rika steals a glance at Jazeera TV on the wall in front of her. Her head is well supported by the back of her hard seat. She can feel the wooden rail touching her neck. She pulls the paper up above her eyebrows. From there she still peeps at the screen from time to time. Is something calling her to keep track of the TV news? Her eyes fall quickly to the pages but before she finds her line, she hears the words 'Eech State Guests called *Lukiimam*'. She shoots up. Rika looks straight into the screen. It is as if the word *Lukiimam* perforates her ribs like a spear.

She sits down again, leans back on her seat and takes a deep breath. She lifts up the pages of the newspaper and covers her entire face now. She drops The Sabat News and some pages first cover her lap and then fall down to the brown carpet. She puts her elbows on her desk and digs them in as she throws the palms of her hands open in a questioning gesture. Her open fingers freeze mid-air. She is hardly breathing. She stares hard at the TV screen and then sucks a deep breath in. It is as if her large eyes are about to pop out of their sockets. Our Biology teacher would have said they had already fallen out of her cranium. Her round dark chocolate face narrows down to frowns on her forehead. Her thin black eyebrows are puckered. The bridge of her nose stands clear and straight. It shines like a torch. If you were very close to her, you would see her round nostrils gently rise and fall as she breathes in and out. You would hear that her breathing says she is fed up but her nose tells she will not stop. Her eyelashes are lost in her eyes. Her face is a picture of fury, pain and daring. Yet, Rika fears. She fears compassionately. On the wall, two long ebony African masks with thin eyes and long noses seem to begin weeping. She picks the pages up from the carpet and stands up straight. She opens her eyes wide. They are clear and focused. She lays The Sabat News back carefully on the desk before her. She stays on her feet.

Now, the TV screen is filled with the broad faces of two men with round strong necks well decked with golden *bling- blings* on their shining skins. They smile. They look like twins. They both have jet black hair; and well pronounced thick eyebrows. Naughty smiles play on their lips. Their rosy cheeks flush as if dabbed with a little golden brown blush. They are talking to tree young girls. Their name *Lukiimam* is prominently running in the TV transcript below. The moving strip looks like a black snake belt that moves all the time, tying the TV around its waist. Their pictures remain on the screen for minutes.

Rika sees that the two men sometimes look like one man, and then suddenly they look like two men. It is as if she is dizzy looking at them. It is as if light waves leave their faces and blind her eyes. Suddenly, it is as if they leave the screen, get tele -transported in the instant into the newsroom where she is standing and hit her. They are still on the screen.

A frail woman is seen for few seconds shouting at these men with a shrill voice. She is a villager in poor clothes. The crowds on the street laugh at her. The people are pleased to see the *Lukiimam* who now flex their huge arm muscles facing the woman. They both hit the woman. She falls down. The crowd cheers. The little woman stands up again. She dusts her skirt and shouts at the shining men again sticking out her neck harder and preparing to run should they charge at her. Nobody consoles or joins her. Rika stares till one cold tear in her right eye gathers and falls, rolling down her cheek. She can feel the edges of her own upper eye lids move higher and higher. A soft movement as if of a tiny gentle breeze covers her eyeballs. Something has travelled from one little capillary to the next inside her eye. The soft sensation over her eyes disappears. More tears fill her eyes, roll down her cheeks and hit her breasts. The right side of her upper lip twitches with pain. This has never happened to her before; and certainly, not in the newsroom. Her eyes hurt deeply.

In Rika's eyes now, each one of the men still on the screen, is a glittering snake charming the other as venom swells on both their necks.

She stares at them. She can see that they are coated with tantulum -acid resistant and long lasting- and they are ready to bite, poison and kill for those on whose behalf they work; but not before some dancing to charm the world.

The dance

When the two snakes start dancing, she can see their dance takes over all other dances. They swallow traditional, church and even all modern dances. All these dances disappear without a sneer and it is not clear how this happens.

But Rika knows. Their dance is like no other. It is choreographed by those who stole all African beads behind our backs and gave them to the two snakes to decorate themselves. They were also given all dances to dance without song.

How wonderful that not all our songs were swallowed! At least we have the songs that touch us and make us! It was impossible to tell how the underworld would tango with the upper world. It was the dance of two big snakes to whom all were beholden. Do not blame anyone who knows or wants to know about this dance – Rika does both- if they seem to think too much. If sometimes you hear such people talk to themselves as they keep long vigil hours, try to understand. If you see them take long and endless journeys, you will know why.

These snakes hiss. She watches them closely. They teach young girls to kiss and hiss fast. She listens hard to their words. She keenly watches their rhythm. These snakes move their forked tongues. They begin to tell lies. The young girls copy them. Men in the country, not even those who say they have formed a gang to fight for liberation and have made a return to traditional religion- a group which the government has proscribed- do not fight the snakes.

She stares at them. She can see that they are coated with tantulum -acid resistant and long lasting- and they are ready to bite, poison and kill for those on whose behalf they work; but not before some dancing to charm the world.

The dance

When the two snakes start dancing, she can see their dance takes over all other dances. They swallow traditional, church and even all modern dances. All these dances disappear without a sneer and it is not clear how this happens.

But Rika knows. Their dance is like no other. It is choreographed by those who stole all African beads behind our backs and gave them to the two snakes to decorate themselves. They were also given all dances to dance without song.

How wonderful that not all our songs were swallowed! At least we have the songs that touch us and make us! It was impossible to tell how the underworld would tango with the upper world. It was the dance of two big snakes to whom all were beholden. Do not blame anyone who knows or wants to know about this dance – Rika does both- if they seem to think too much. If sometimes you hear such people talk to themselves as they keep long vigil hours, try to understand. If you see them take long and endless journeys, you will know why.

These snakes hiss. She watches them closely. They teach young girls to kiss and hiss fast. She listens hard to their words. She keenly watches their rhythm. These snakes move their forked tongues. They begin to tell lies. The young girls copy them. Men in the country, not even those who say they have formed a gang to fight for liberation and have made a return to traditional religion- a group which the government has proscribed- do not fight the snakes.

The *Lukiimam* twins lie even more. They say that in the beginning, there were no beads in Africa. They refuse to name *Kaffi*, *Krobo*, *Mateyi* or *Akoso* all of them marvelous African beads. The African girls who flock around them say they want lighter skins. They say they want to be called Jacquieen, Amaryllizard, Pixie, Ivy and Merculeeine, Jaynie or ‘civilized’ names like Arleenix, Ileenha, Queen Mavel, Queen Tiger and Princess Patbell.

Maybe when the dance of the snake ends, we can ask these *bling-bling* men questions. But not now. Would the silver, gold and diamonds they eat and drink allow them to hear us speaking with baked beads in our burnt mouths and hands? Maybe when the dance ends we can check out the names of our boys and girls, our own names. Aha, Maxwell Mackenzie M’kaaww had finished reporting the most important TV news item of the evening.

If this were a folk story, we would not understand Rika’s fallen jaw, her tears and her dismay. But now we understand her shock, for this is real life in Nairobi that she is looking at. It is not a story. She was looking at the streets she walked on and breathed from, there reflected on the screen of TV Jazeera. She was looking at men who came to Nairobi, saw, ‘conquered’ and were never seen again. They were people who would never know of her hundreds of painful footsteps in dark nights searching for the truth of how a country got so robbed and swindled. The truth of how a nation was throttled and deprived of fresh air until it was suffocating like a big blind fish on a sea shore. The next day, another simple woman from rural Kenya was seen as she screamed at these men on the street until some of their *bling-blings* fell off. She was not interviewed on her views. She became a comical figure for all to laugh at. A week after, it was said that the shining men disappeared but returned decked in diamonds and gold from a longer journey inland. They had crossed borders to the west of Kenya towards the DR Congo and returned. They said they owned Africa.

Rika was still in the newsroom. Now someone in the newsroom holding a remote control, changed from TV Jazeera to The Kenya Cooperative Channel, (KCC) with an unseen hand. KCC was in the middle of broadcasting the *Lukiimam* too. Then a series on needy cases started. There were medical appeals for: tongues, hearts, left eyes, fingers, lower and upper lips, vaginas, toes, teeth, breasts, heads, fingernails, stomachs, noses, right eyes, kidneys, ears, legs and hands on the Kenya Cooperative Corporation TV announcement program. The hand with the remote control begun to move to different TV channels for a few seconds, as if copying and pasting news clips. All the other channels were broadcasting those men grinning from ear to ear. There they were, beaming from all the respected TV stations, occupying all the screens in the country, their reflections filling the only mirrors Kenya had in common. Rika continued watching.

The weather next. Warm weather is about to phase out a cold July, the coldest month in Kenya. But global weather patterns are shifting and with a smiling voice, the announcer seems to say that it is up to you if you get caught in a sudden storm. Everyone knows seasons are unpredictable now. For now however, Rika's mind is taken up with her next scoop. She has calmed down. She was through with checking her previous stories carried in The Sabat News. Good, she thought. More time to write and get published if she was lucky. She was always searching for the hottest potato but not everyone was interested in all hot potatoes. The TV was switched off by a remote hand and the newsroom returned to silence. Rika stared at the ceiling.

Rika you have no proof

Rika had been working all night. Sometimes the stories she wrote did not get published. They often disappeared when they were rich in detail. The editor would say to her that she had made her stories too long. She

Rika was still in the newsroom. Now someone in the newsroom holding a remote control, changed from TV Jazeera to The Kenya Cooperative Channel, (KCC) with an unseen hand. KCC was in the middle of broadcasting the *Lukiimam* too. Then a series on needy cases started. There were medical appeals for: tongues, hearts, left eyes, fingers, lower and upper lips, vaginas, toes, teeth, breasts, heads, fingernails, stomachs, noses, right eyes, kidneys, ears, legs and hands on the Kenya Cooperative Corporation TV announcement program. The hand with the remote control begun to move to different TV channels for a few seconds, as if copying and pasting news clips. All the other channels were broadcasting those men grinning from ear to ear. There they were, beaming from all the respected TV stations, occupying all the screens in the country, their reflections filling the only mirrors Kenya had in common. Rika continued watching.

The weather next. Warm weather is about to phase out a cold July, the coldest month in Kenya. But global weather patterns are shifting and with a smiling voice, the announcer seems to say that it is up to you if you get caught in a sudden storm. Everyone knows seasons are unpredictable now. For now however, Rika's mind is taken up with her next scoop. She has calmed down. She was through with checking her previous stories carried in The Sabat News. Good, she thought. More time to write and get published if she was lucky. She was always searching for the hottest potato but not everyone was interested in all hot potatoes. The TV was switched off by a remote hand and the newsroom returned to silence. Rika stared at the ceiling.

Rika you have no proof

Rika had been working all night. Sometimes the stories she wrote did not get published. They often disappeared when they were rich in detail. The editor would say to her that she had made her stories too long. She

was told every sentence needed proof. She received a warning MEMO headed, 'No proof' often. She knew this was a hurdle mounted before her and not a gate to go through. Teams to work on difficult items were never formed in Sabat News. Was it a warning MEMO she needed or support? Was The Sabat News management unable to trust her nose? Rika vowed to watch the night and to dive as deeply as she could into darkness if that is where the best light was.

If again we were to think about the details of how hard Rika worked, we would be tempted to think that she is a fairy God mother and that this is a strange tale. As for Rika, when she felt like taking things easy, she remembered the millions of voiceless women in Afrika. Women died silently working on the land and in other jobs. This could be said of many countries.

We know Rika works with the energy of a woman who is- in - charge of seven gates. It is she who wo/mans all these gates, especially her own seventh gate within her and this she does gracefully too. She works just like most of our mothers. She works for many hours, almost forgetting herself, just like most of our mothers in Afrika have always done. The scene she had just seen on TV would never leave her mind, yet the two men who looked alike, the *Lukiimam*, had no hard questions thrown at them on TV. She was still then taken aback.

Rika knew she was not living in a fairy world. She was not virtual but actual in the way in which one might move their hand, lift a glass and take their first sip ever of a new drink that delights. A sip for example, from a clean glass full of a fresh and cool Senegalese thick baobab juice on a damp and hot afternoon. Rika works with her fingers as truly as how an initial sip of such a precious juice flows down the throat and is followed with more gulps filling the drinker with satisfaction and health. What others may read as virtual is first actual in her.

The taste of her work always begun at the tip of her tongue and into its middle where it gathered before it went right down, still delighting her buds with joy to the end. Rika can smell, touch, see and

hear her work in almost everything. She dreams of it vividly even at night. Most people would be afraid of dreams like hers, they are so real. How could work filled with passion and dreams like this not explode with power? Energy moves energy.

“Don’t call me a workaholic!” Rika sharply objects to her colleague Kikeshe. Kikeshe was trying to get Nguvu the evening driver to take him to a ‘watering hole’ as they called drinking places, to meet the Minister for Social Services after work. He made up the excuse that Rika was working all the time. Nguvu explained to Kikeshe that he was assigned to drive Rika for the next two months, three times a week, and he could not take up an extra task.

“You are a workaholic! And a feminist too!” Said Kikeshe. “A workaholic feminist!” He emphasised.

“No Kikeshe. You must not try to organise me through definitions that you get wrong anyway. If all you need is transport, talk to the administration and get somebody to help you. No, Kikeshe am not living on feminism or any ‘ism’ as the world likes to brand any women, especially Afrikan ones, who can express themselves. I do not believe in brands which *you think* feminism is. I am not the West, as you will soon say. You know am creative!” Kikeshe smiled at a colleague whose time many people did not attempt to waste. He knew he was in the wrong and trying the wrong person. He left. He knew nobody would listen to his case against Rika. Rika’s well earned respect was unquestionable; however, she was still a mystery, like most people are. Many who would never understand her.

Rika is in charge of everything that comes from her heart. She keeps her goal posts free of scores of humiliation. If one thinks of some games, one might say she is a Centre Forward. She shoots goals straight into the goal posts. She is in charge of herself, her home and her children; naturally then, she is a defender. You will wince that she has too much to care about, but her story is her life. She cannot separate it and put it aside to watch it, wince or frown. Rika has not time for that.

Alarm

A constant buzz fills the newsroom. It is a special and muzzled sound. It is so natural here, it becomes part of the silence. It is a silent whirl which you have not heard anywhere else before. In the newsroom, it is a siren, soft like in Greek mythology where sirens are sweet songs of sea nymphs. For Rika it is a call to even more commitment to her work. You can tell when a group of people in a room are thinking and working thoroughly; work fills every molecule in the air. You may not be able to tell of what they dream, but you can see their hands moving. It is often like this at Sabat News. The newsroom buzz is made up of muted sounds softly falling on the ear. Not a sound of people walking across the floors can be heard, the open plan office is carpeted from wall- to- wall.

Even still, now and then, noise sometimes finds its way into this newsroom as when, for example, a crowd of demonstrators burst out chanting and running up the floors of the tall building from street level. Journalists are prepared to work amidst noise. The best of them do not fear the dark. The darkness of the city at night, the 'darkness' of an abandoned desert oasis in broad daylight is life for these. Journalists must know many more things including how to continue when the rest of the city, sometimes an entire country, seems to stop. They must know when to look all the time and when not to look directly at all; when to hit and when to miss; the pen being so mighty machetes weep in shame. Rika and some others knew this, many did not.

Prrrrr. Prrrrr. Prrrrrrrr! Once in a while a sharper than normal telephone ring tone, almost funny in its notes, makes many look up and smile, some even laugh. No one wants to answer it fast. It sounds like a complaint call even before it is picked up. Very often *it was* one from an ordinary reader calling to ask if what was published was true. Other times it was an enraged boss calling to complain about a caption under an office group photograph taken at the firm's strategic meeting in which names were mixed up calling the cleaner the boss and the boss

the cleaner. An even more important clarification called for an apology in the paper, the boss said, because it reflected poorly on the company's corporate image. It was that the meeting was not held at Thusiwe River Lodge in North Eastern Kenya, but in the Great Rift Valley Greater Kudus Lodge. But this particular phone had a long history. The reason why all were cautious about answering it was what had happened a couple of times. Prrrrrrrr, Prrrrrr, it rang innocently in its funny tone. An Assistant Editor who was passing by answered it.

"Saab News, good evening! How can I help you?"

"Hhmmmm! hmehmmm! There was the sound of inhibited and deliberate throat clearing on the other end. The sound was very clear as if the person was in a noise insulated space. There was total silence for a few long seconds and then the caller began to speak his first words in English.

"Phleaaase.. is that the Saaabu? Canyai.. can I..?"

The Assistant Editor understood him at once. 'Please, is that The Sabat, Can I?' and he almost fainted. It was the voice of the Big Man himself. The Big Man was on the phone. It was clear he did not expect to be transferred to anybody else. Messages shot through the editor's head fast. His brain seemed to be swimming and zooming at the same time. He longed to drop the phone and shout, "The Big Man is on the line!" but he could not. He stood there planted on his two feet but leaning forward head first. He looked like a leaning tower. The Big Man had a couple of issues he said. He asked what was going to be written as he put it, in the *Goffee Story* and if it was a journalist of repute, one that he knew, who would do it.

"I Sir, I am writing it. I am, Sir, Jow Jurist?"

"Oh, Jow Jurist! I know you. You need an African name. Call this number and read the story back to me in a few minutes. Also, do let me know which photographs you are going to use and how!"

The phone was replaced before Jow Jurist who had a stomachache now could sit down. He dropped the Coffee Story and called back to

quickly say that it was not going to be used. The Big Man laughed and called him a good boy. Jow Jurist did not speak for a week. He did not bother to tell anybody that he was circumcised and this name 'boy' hurt him! Who could he tell? His wife? The Big Man? His boss? Most of the time he slept on his desk in the office. He left the office late at night and preferred to live in lodgings.

It was not funny to pick up the phone only to hear the the Big Man clearing his throat and wondering about reporters and stories. In fact, who could endure to even hold the telephone set after hearing *His* unmistakable voice? Two others who answered previous calls He had made, reacted almost exactly in the same way at different times in the same spot. The Big Man never asked for the boss, he just spoke to whoever answered the phone and it was obvious from his tone that he expected clear, quick and concise answers. There was no knowing when he would call. Those two who answered his telephone calls had danced all over twisting their bodies as if to prevent their bowels from bursting forth as they held the headsets and spoke to him. One of them rushed to the toilet immediately he finished and sat on the toilet bowl for half an hour. But the other one fell on to his knees and lifted the telephone handset as if in adoration.

No one could assess the impact the call had on him but the next week he was queueing up to see the Big Man. He wanted to tell him about his daughter who needed funds for a heart operation and to mention a plot of land he had spotted near the slums. If there was a free moment, he would also tell the Big Man about his and his Mother's ear drums. He would tell the Big Man that he and his mother too needed hearing aids.

Now the soft whirr, a rackety phone tone of a landline headset, and an occasional shout from an excited editor are the normal sounds in this newsroom. "Copyyyy!!!" The Senior Editor shouted again. The General had spoken. A sense of power plays on the faces of all others;

they do not have to sit up every time an editor sneezes but they do take note. None of them are ready. The editor grimaces in pain.

Most often, editors have their heads buried in their work or right inside copy as journalists would say. For hours, one would believe they never saw or heard anything; they had joined the lives of burrowing animals. Rika loved being outside the pages and walking through her slice of life. Her kind of stories, long features, required that she did just that. After she surveyed situations, she could dive very deep into their hidden dimensions writing. On some weekends, she wrote short stories at home.

Hair driers; girls in the ring

In ABeeConnections salon elsewhere in Nairobi's Westlands, the high sound of hair driers filled the air. Gorharrrrrrrr, hrrrrrr, harrrrrrrrrr, they went. It was hard for anyone to converse but the women there, still did. They heard each other even above the squeaky blow drier that most of the girls preferred in the hands of their best male hair dresser, Tony.

Maya is 16. She is a student in one of Nairobi's international schools. This morning, she is having her hair laid out in golden colored curls. She has a deep glow on her face. Maya can hardly sit down today, her own secret made her almost bob up and down. Now Maya insists that her make-up has to be immaculate. She twists the clasp of her golden purse and it makes a rich clicking sound as it opens, she stares at many bank notes stashed there and smiles. She sits up.

"I have a date with a *Lukiimam*, one of the two famous men in town that everyone is talking about. The men whom TV journalists are trailing to report how they laugh and sneeze! That one... not his brother has given me a date!" All the women turn and look at her in admiration and disbelief. She is smiling alone into the mirror at the prospect of sitting across the table facing a *Lukiimam*, whose presence in town had reminded many Kenyans of Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*.

they do not have to sit up every time an editor sneezes but they do take note. None of them are ready. The editor grimaces in pain.

Most often, editors have their heads buried in their work or right inside copy as journalists would say. For hours, one would believe they never saw or heard anything; they had joined the lives of burrowing animals. Rika loved being outside the pages and walking through her slice of life. Her kind of stories, long features, required that she did just that. After she surveyed situations, she could dive very deep into their hidden dimensions writing. On some weekends, she wrote short stories at home.

Hair driers; girls in the ring

In ABeeConnections salon elsewhere in Nairobi's Westlands, the high sound of hair driers filled the air. Gorharrrrrrrr, hrrrrrr, harrrrrrrrrr, they went. It was hard for anyone to converse but the women there, still did. They heard each other even above the squeaky blow drier that most of the girls preferred in the hands of their best male hair dresser, Tony.

Maya is 16. She is a student in one of Nairobi's international schools. This morning, she is having her hair laid out in golden colored curls. She has a deep glow on her face. Maya can hardly sit down today, her own secret made her almost bob up and down. Now Maya insists that her make-up has to be immaculate. She twists the clasp of her golden purse and it makes a rich clicking sound as it opens, she stares at many bank notes stashed there and smiles. She sits up.

"I have a date with a *Lukiimam*, one of the two famous men in town that everyone is talking about. The men whom TV journalists are trailing to report how they laugh and sneeze! That one... not his brother has given me a date!" All the women turn and look at her in admiration and disbelief. She is smiling alone into the mirror at the prospect of sitting across the table facing a *Lukiimam*, whose presence in town had reminded many Kenyans of Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*.

Living partly in her imagination and partly in real life, at school Maya tells the other students that she is an Arab and at other times, she tells them that she is Russian. Who she is all depends on her mood and opportunity. She is now both excited and dreamy. The hairdresser jolts her back from her daydream as he puts his fingers through her hair and brushes it out once again reviving her curls. Maya quickly relapses into her other world. It is as if she is drunk, her neck is bent to the left. Her eyes are shut. Stars dance in her mind.

In her daydream, she gets stuck on an instance that she remembers as if it were the only one in her entire life. It was the moment when Maya introduced her Mum to this *Lukiimam* man, with her tiny fingers trembling, but with the confidence of a girl who had known all that her Mum knew about life. He, the visitor in town, had immediately taken her Mum aside and into a room and shut the door. He kissed her all over just like he had done to Maya. He then showered Ma with diamonds which she loved but had never had. He did unto mother just what he had done to daughter. His bait had worked.

“Come Ma! Come Ma! These also are yours, gold and diamonds. Who said you would live in pain forever? Look, I can multiply things, and am not Jesus!”

He had known that she too would come to see this king. He pulled a drawer bringing out lots of brand new dollars for Maya’s young Mum. He gave her more diamonds the more her eyes opened widely. She had no idea if they were fake but she wore the chains and some of the shining diamonds, even before she left his large office in a middle level hotel which the two brothers used only in the day time. For a while, Mum and daughter did not know what to do with themselves. They were in a trance, both of them dreamt about the same man in great detail. Maya’s Mum said the man reminded her of Maya’s father only that he was rich and generous where as her husband –for-sometime, had been rich and mean. Silence was the seal of this deal now.

The talk of the town was that mother and daughter had signed a contract to keep everything about their friendships, work and office operations secret, and never to speak about the Twins even in the most secret of places. These men told Maya and her Mum that the TVs and newspapers would publicize them only how and when they wished. Maya and her Mum were to play no part in that. They knew nothing of these men's lives if any one were to ask them. Death was the penalty for telling on them.

The media would obey their bigger commanders, the *Lukiimam* said. The media would follow the men of money, of this, the *Lukiimam* were sure. They grinned happily. They could not see the media beyond the screen and they thought all journalists were like the ones they bought with a little money; those they ordered about like robots. Maya and her mother were high with a fizzy happiness. They walked on their sharp heels with glee all over town. Maya began to say that she was not a school girl, but a private pilot for hire. She said she flew Cessnas.

Roots and connections

It is early evening. Rika pours herself a cup of rich black tea mixed with lemon and ginger. She needs it for her sore throat. The haunting image of those two milk- mixed with tea- colored faces, jet black thick eyebrows and high dark hair that framed their oval faces, is stuck on her mind. She can still see their *bling- bling* jumping off their twin chests and hands with fingers studded with rings. What did they do with so many little beautiful girls in that hotel room? Why did they mix them up with their mothers? She would follow them keenly. Where do those sleek taxis that they call, take some of the girls? Towards the airport that was for sure, but where was their final destination? She tried to nudge the management of The Grande Corruption Conspiracy where they often were, but they were silent on the matter. The waiters and receptionists

The talk of the town was that mother and daughter had signed a contract to keep everything about their friendships, work and office operations secret, and never to speak about the Twins even in the most secret of places. These men told Maya and her Mum that the TVs and newspapers would publicize them only how and when they wished. Maya and her Mum were to play no part in that. They knew nothing of these men's lives if any one were to ask them. Death was the penalty for telling on them.

The media would obey their bigger commanders, the *Lukiimam* said. The media would follow the men of money, of this, the *Lukiimam* were sure. They grinned happily. They could not see the media beyond the screen and they thought all journalists were like the ones they bought with a little money; those they ordered about like robots. Maya and her mother were high with a fizzy happiness. They walked on their sharp heels with glee all over town. Maya began to say that she was not a school girl, but a private pilot for hire. She said she flew Cessnas.

Roots and connections

It is early evening. Rika pours herself a cup of rich black tea mixed with lemon and ginger. She needs it for her sore throat. The haunting image of those two milk- mixed with tea- colored faces, jet black thick eyebrows and high dark hair that framed their oval faces, is stuck on her mind. She can still see their *bling- bling* jumping off their twin chests and hands with fingers studded with rings. What did they do with so many little beautiful girls in that hotel room? Why did they mix them up with their mothers? She would follow them keenly. Where do those sleek taxis that they call, take some of the girls? Towards the airport that was for sure, but where was their final destination? She tried to nudge the management of The Grande Corruption Conspiracy where they often were, but they were silent on the matter. The waiters and receptionists

begun to avoid her path and her phone calls. How could they talk when they well knew that the woman who sat for hours with these *bling bling* men was well connected to politicians? If it were about Maya and her Mum, perhaps they would speak, but they did not know them for they were guests of the men elsewhere. This woman was different and feared. Quite often, politicians responded to all her gestures. A simple sneeze from her made them all stand up and salute her as if she was the Commander in Chief of the armed forces.

It was strange. Rika knew that back in the Congo only five years ago, this powerful woman, the kind of Afrikan woman that many writers and documentary makers feared to profile beyond the glitter, had been driven past many skeletons of raped and killed women in Bukavu. Her high stilletoes at the back of the United African Nations car were full of small dirty pebbles. There were boxes full of monkey skins as well in her car. Years later after she left her job, no one took much notice of her as she cleaned a posh hotel in Paris where she met politicians from all over Afrika. Her face was the color of brown honey and her make-up exquisite. Rika found her color artificial, like the color of an orange factory -made drink, but this was not Rika's main concern right now. She knew much more about this woman who ruled the men with her body. To get stuck on her bleached skin and make-up would be to lose focus. Powerful men worshipped her. Other women stared at, her from a distance. She fixed male politicians with a power that came out of every pore of her honey skin, turning them into powerless servants of her world. They stared at her round closed eye slits as her eyelashes fluttered before she uttered her final decision on their business plans. Journalists insisted on transmitting every gesture of hers on TV and so the youth of the country often imitated her. They adored her power from afar.

She now lived in Nairobi, spoke East African Kiswahili and a few local languages and perfect English. In Nairobi she said she picked up Hindi. Business languages came to her and stayed on her tongue as she magnetized them with the help of her gold coated teeth.

She had a deep secret which she shared only with her daughter. No one knew that every night, her teenage daughter had to kiss her mother's diamond studs which were stuck deep in her tongue. They were rooted beyond the tip, at the level of her first molars, right there in the middle. Her daughter had to kiss them. Mother told daughter that was a small ritual to be performed every night and that with time, she would teach her other things that would be beyond what any poor human being would ever learn. This was part of their classy living she said. Her daughter was completely attached to her Ma's tongue. When she looked at her mother's large breasts, she thought of her tongue immediately and leaned on her chest without even knowing it.

Another night and it was again the same well dressed, and round eyed powerful woman and a special friend of hers out together in endless negotiations. He was now a Member of Parliament and a very powerful government minister. He thought he was the love of her life. He had been in politics for long.

He was the man taxi drivers spoke of as a legend. The man- the drivers kept telling anyone who would listen- whom they had driven when he was wealthy and powerful but not as wealthy and powerful as he was today. He was the man. The man, who had become only more wealthy and powerful by the minute, as the drivers died one by one. Some of them starved and sick died young and new to the job, still repeating the legend of the man who got more powerful and more wealthy every day. They wondered how he beat them all. They too were educated. They sometimes often talked of becoming better than him, beating him cleverly like the hare in African narratives beats big animals. They too, they said, were circumcised like him. They died still talking and dreaming and he moved to even higher levels. Some of them died haggard, old and poor, with the same legend of his progress alive like a creeper on their lips. They told the story of this man who seemed to have a magic wand as they huddled together to beat the cold weather on chilly mornings and as they chased fast moving shades cast by trees and buildings in hot Nairobi afternoons.

But some of the taxi drivers daringly said to the others that they knew so much money was stolen by politicians and that this man was a thief too. Kama even said, “Kwani, if I say it where will they take me? They cannot detain me in Manyani or throw me in Shimoni like the colonialist did to my father and uncle!” Yet, they all knew it was better to just marvel at the legend than to be too loud. It had to be remembered that all things, even taxi seats and doors, had ears. When they laughed on misty mornings and dark evenings, Kama always reminded them of that Maasai proverb which says “The ear penetrates darkness!” They often joked that they ate stories and proverbs for all their meals. “Come, let us eat stories!” They were often heard saying. After sometime, they watched the legendary man’s growth in guarded silence. He had the biggest security detail anyone had ever seen.

Wooing a scoop, hotel and street power

Rika felt aware of every part of her body and power when she walked into the big hotel. The shining men who had been on TV sat in a corner in one of Nairobi’s most posh hotels. She had not spoken to Her Worship the Gold, as she called the powerful woman now, but just watched her from afar. Rika was dressed in a *bui bui* and most people assumed that she was waiting for someone to come for her.

This hotel, built as all could see, on a mountain of gold was where the most senior people in civil society, government, judiciary, parliament, some churches and the literati met their friends and where some held policy meetings. Rika had been there many times to meet different people. The last time she was there women were debating the new constitution. They were funded by donors to hold high level meetings and this was a higher level hotel. This one hotel was one of the safest in Nairobi, it was argued. No one asked what security was and why all the other hotels were not so safe. This was the only hotel of its kind in the

But some of the taxi drivers daringly said to the others that they knew so much money was stolen by politicians and that this man was a thief too. Kama even said, “Kwani, if I say it where will they take me? They cannot detain me in Manyani or throw me in Shimoni like the colonialist did to my father and uncle!” Yet, they all knew it was better to just marvel at the legend than to be too loud. It had to be remembered that all things, even taxi seats and doors, had ears. When they laughed on misty mornings and dark evenings, Kama always reminded them of that Maasai proverb which says “The ear penetrates darkness!” They often joked that they ate stories and proverbs for all their meals. “Come, let us eat stories!” They were often heard saying. After sometime, they watched the legendary man’s growth in guarded silence. He had the biggest security detail anyone had ever seen.

Wooing a scoop, hotel and street power

Rika felt aware of every part of her body and power when she walked into the big hotel. The shining men who had been on TV sat in a corner in one of Nairobi’s most posh hotels. She had not spoken to Her Worship the Gold, as she called the powerful woman now, but just watched her from afar. Rika was dressed in a *bui bui* and most people assumed that she was waiting for someone to come for her.

This hotel, built as all could see, on a mountain of gold was where the most senior people in civil society, government, judiciary, parliament, some churches and the literati met their friends and where some held policy meetings. Rika had been there many times to meet different people. The last time she was there women were debating the new constitution. They were funded by donors to hold high level meetings and this was a higher level hotel. This one hotel was one of the safest in Nairobi, it was argued. No one asked what security was and why all the other hotels were not so safe. This was the only hotel of its kind in the

city. It looked as if it had been made by a jeweler- the ones they call *pattnis* even here in Kenya. Rika changed its name in her heart and called it Berg-a - Gold! She had a habit of calling places by other names and explaining that names really do matter.

She had named and re-named many hotels several times. She called one hotel 'Not-so- Serene Uhuru Chains'. She made Nguvu wince when she said she was going to 'Awinja Star Safari Hotel' near the University. He knew what she meant. He was a new driver in 'The Sabat News Company' when a student and actor was killed by slabs that fell from the crane as this hotel was getting constructed. Near the Kenya National Theatre Rika named a big hotel 'The Nyanjiru & Thuku Hotel', and in the city centre she named another: 'Kimathi & Mukami Thorn Tree hotel'.

She had her own name for every big hotel in town and each hotel had its own story, which was captured by the name. 'Berg-a -Gold Hotel' glittered outside and inside. It had a special business place called 'The Grande Corruption Conspiracy Room'. Those two men who would never fade in her mind were there now. They sat on white leather sofas with their *bling- bling* all over their chests. Here they were, biting deep into a deal.

Rika saw again the jewelry that covered every part of their business woman colleague who shone all over with golden teeth. She saw the flickering light on her tongue which only Rika's eye could trace to her shiny diamond tongue studs. Her chest was clad with fine chains. Her transparent top looked as if it was also made of pure gold. A fine thin white leather belt separated the gold of her top from her waist upwards from the gold of her skirt laid on black rich fabric. Her white leather sandals had fine shiny golden lines. Rika felt angry and helpless seeing this shameless display of power. She remembered one taxi driver telling her how they felt seeing the golden lady and the golden men on TV whilst remembering the man who was a legend. The man who became wealthier every day, as they became poorer by the minute. They felt

betrayed. She felt the same. This time she swallowed her tears with pain. If only they could all shame these people like that simple rural woman had done it on the streets. But she was alone that woman, alone, and nobody followed her up for her opinion. People and journalists looked at her as if she were mad. The people were starving and they only worried about tomorrow's loaf of bread.

"Please help me!" Achieng would be crying at the rich woman's gate before dawn trying to see if the watchman could help her enter in and get some help for her sickly child.

"My child is dying, dying. I have been raped. My child has been raped too!" She said. It was as if she was talking about the rain falling or the sun shining when such painful things came out of her mouth. And she was not alone. It was not the case of a voice crying 'Sir, will you help me?' on the street. It was a huge choir of cries in sopranos, tenor, descants, base and altos! Voices crying in songs. And this was only throat singing. Most of their voices, for their voices included many others such as grunts, sighs and ululations- tongue, lip and cheek singing- were yet to be picked up and registered in musical notes and heard in the world. These words haunted Rika, 'Help me! Help me! Please will you help me!?' They became the voice of her heart. Maybe when all voices were picked up, the happy ones would outdo the sad ones. Maybe then wealth would not be counted in money and other possessions. For now bleak would speak.

Through their educated children, some other people tried to get proposals and letters of introduction to this or that project to the powerful woman. They called her an NGO but she did not read proposals. She went to small fundraising meetings and gave big money. The word 'small' was out of place in her life. She and her friends said they only did big things.

Rika knew that when Her Worship the Gold went to visit some of the projects she picked from the many invitations she received, she spent almost a million shillings in a few hours. She dished out neat, brand

new perfumed bank notes from small packages, and gave them out freely. She did this with her own hands and many were surprised to see that her long nails could hold something. When she left the venue of the fundraising meeting with her security detail, some people were killed as they tried to get the money.

The next morning, as she glances at the news of her visit so prominent on the pages many newspapers, the golden woman smiles and her mother of pearl necklaces shine like her teeth. If you asked why she reigned in the pages, the editors would tell you that this was newsy news. In media pictures, nobody would ever see the light that flashed from the diamond studs in her mouth. The editor was looking for news that people liked to consume fast translating newsprint into gold. He was looking for news like the news we all wait to publish when finally man bites dog!

Chopped

Rika's story on her Her Worship the Gold's visit was chopped as they would say in the newsroom. Instead, many of the woman's photos filled the pages again going wide across the center spread. She had followed the deaths that happened after Her Worship the Gold left the venue and which were not reported. When the people read the news, they spread rumors that Her Worship the Gold solved all the poor people's problems, especially those of women.

"I wish I were this woman. I am going to learn all her tricks!", Maya was saying in the ABeeConnections salon, where she was already back for a paid- up styling days after her date.

"I must make it big in life! My Mother and I were not born for small drama." She added.

Many young women longed to be like the powerful woman. Many older women also longed to be like her. Many fathers wished their

new perfumed bank notes from small packages, and gave them out freely. She did this with her own hands and many were surprised to see that her long nails could hold something. When she left the venue of the fundraising meeting with her security detail, some people were killed as they tried to get the money.

The next morning, as she glances at the news of her visit so prominent on the pages many newspapers, the golden woman smiles and her mother of pearl necklaces shine like her teeth. If you asked why she reigned in the pages, the editors would tell you that this was newsy news. In media pictures, nobody would ever see the light that flashed from the diamond studs in her mouth. The editor was looking for news that people liked to consume fast translating newsprint into gold. He was looking for news like the news we all wait to publish when finally man bites dog!

Chopped

Rika's story on her Her Worship the Gold's visit was chopped as they would say in the newsroom. Instead, many of the woman's photos filled the pages again going wide across the center spread. She had followed the deaths that happened after Her Worship the Gold left the venue and which were not reported. When the people read the news, they spread rumors that Her Worship the Gold solved all the poor people's problems, especially those of women.

"I wish I were this woman. I am going to learn all her tricks!", Maya was saying in the ABeeConnections salon, where she was already back for a paid- up styling days after her date.

"I must make it big in life! My Mother and I were not born for small drama." She added.

Many young women longed to be like the powerful woman. Many older women also longed to be like her. Many fathers wished their

daughters would be not just *like her* but *her* in the *near* future. Parts of Rika's article which questioned why government ministries did not have enough money and did not work efficiently were missing. She had also asked how this woman got mountains of money, money enough to run a whole ministry of social services, to spend on her pet projects. The editor defined feature articles for Rika again, telling her that they were not supposed to contain her views but just what he called 'things as they are'. The phone with the funny tones did not ring with complaints about this woman ever. Instead, hand written letters particularly in one local language filled P.O. Box 0000, The Sabat News postal address. No one asked how Her Worship the Gold got so much money in one of the countries where people are mainly supposed to have less than the famous dollar a day. The letters revealed that many people were cheated easily by powers.

That night Her Worship the Gold was seen dancing on the TV screen as she asked people to elect her man, whom she said she loved very much. She was talking about the man whose wealth and power grew by night and day. She would capture the poor with her story of rags -to -riches that would make entertainment in India's Bollywood, Hollywood, Kenya's Riverwood and even in Nigeria's Nollywood fade into insignificance. She often declared she would be the one to start LingAlawood cinemas in Democratic Republic of Congo.

Many students in school thought Maya was great, when she told them that one of these men- now she had a hard time proving which one- was her boyfriend.

"This girl is bright and daring!" Said one of her male teachers.

"And she cares for her mother's plight!" Added the headmistress.

The teachers all agreed she was a role model even if she was doing poorly in her tests. Success, they said, using their own experience, was not about academic achievement. The teachers said they had worked so hard, earned degrees and still their salaries were poor. They were on strike every second month and their better terms were always a promise.

They knew that education was not to be equated with money power but still they needed basic. In this society having enough was not the measure. It was having much to store and show off that prevailed.

The teachers said Maya's aggressiveness was to be admired for few girls knew how to get diamonds and gold from presidents and governments. Few girls, they said knew how to get gold and diamonds from well connected people.

"Don't be surprised to see this girl becoming an MP in the near future. This is the type that makes it! This is the type of girl that flies to high places to stay!" The male teacher said.

Fast moving nights

Still on another night in the Berg-a –Gold Hotel, Rika sat quietly studying Her Worship the Gold. Rika was not going to get close to her for personal attention. She was at work.

In the depths of the night, Rika thought profoundly. The more this wealth shone in hotels and on shining men and women, the more poorest cold places as for example, toilets in the slums got darker and darker and colder. The more villages died. The more flies and disease multiplied there as pain did, the more viruses unseen crept from the rural zones to the slum areas and rich suburbs. Just like she never had complete evidence to show for all the lines she wrote, so too, nobody could show a virus on TV or in a lab. Should it have been easier to believe a virus did not exist because it could not be seen? Was it better not to talk about symptoms of viral life? Whereas wealth could be limited to a few, infections and disease knew no borders. Nobody was secure. It was exciting for Rika to be interested in all these things but it was unpleasant to keep seeing these gigantic cobwebs in which everyone was getting caught. She worked tirelessly on stories about commercial sex stories in the city.

They knew that education was not to be equated with money power but still they needed basic. In this society having enough was not the measure. It was having much to store and show off that prevailed.

The teachers said Maya's aggressiveness was to be admired for few girls knew how to get diamonds and gold from presidents and governments. Few girls, they said knew how to get gold and diamonds from well connected people.

"Don't be surprised to see this girl becoming an MP in the near future. This is the type that makes it! This is the type of girl that flies to high places to stay!" The male teacher said.

Fast moving nights

Still on another night in the Berg-a –Gold Hotel, Rika sat quietly studying Her Worship the Gold. Rika was not going to get close to her for personal attention. She was at work.

In the depths of the night, Rika thought profoundly. The more this wealth shone in hotels and on shining men and women, the more poorest cold places as for example, toilets in the slums got darker and darker and colder. The more villages died. The more flies and disease multiplied there as pain did, the more viruses unseen crept from the rural zones to the slum areas and rich suburbs. Just like she never had complete evidence to show for all the lines she wrote, so too, nobody could show a virus on TV or in a lab. Should it have been easier to believe a virus did not exist because it could not be seen? Was it better not to talk about symptoms of viral life? Whereas wealth could be limited to a few, infections and disease knew no borders. Nobody was secure. It was exciting for Rika to be interested in all these things but it was unpleasant to keep seeing these gigantic cobwebs in which everyone was getting caught. She worked tirelessly on stories about commercial sex stories in the city.

She knew how the hidden HIV virus traveled in warm blood in the rich and the poor. If the virus were a grasshopper, she could show how it hopped from shack to mansion, from mansion to huts and from flats to apartments. But it was not. If she could mark it red on the streets, corners and alleyways, she could show how it waited for policemen and rich men alike as they raped women quickly and thought they left without a scar. If she could make the virus talk, she would make it speak to the women the women waited for it fastened on their beds because of what they said was faith burning in faithfulness.

As a thousand Swiss Guards shift their feet guarding the Vatican, women wait there in poor homes, prisoners of their own cells. They wait there for their bodily cells to get attacked. Who would wake them up in time before Aids swallowed them? Would there be a real siren from diverse media? Would a traditional cry, the ululation of women for instance, wake all people up for action? Or would women continue ululating for joy even when death was taking from the womb and the old buried the youth? Even when grannies nursed children with salty cold tears?

Rika recalled her last trip to the slums. Women here also liked the song of the blow dryers and telephones calls from men they called their own person- *Mtu wangu* sometimes and then - my rich man, *tajiri wangu*, at other times. The women had many different ring tones and voices in tunes and drools on their phones. Some scientists made their way to the slums to study these women incredible capacities even in warding off HIV infections for years. The vaccine trial was on. The poor would heal the rich, but there was nothing to heal them from the rich. In fact, these made their wounds worse, making them live in an undying longing- day in and day out- to be rich like them. The idea that without property one was nothing had been sold well.

In The Grande Corruption Conspiracy, there appears to be no cobwebs or viruses. Everything here glitters so much that Rika closes her eyes to save them from the glare. Shining money changed hands.

The jewelry on dresses and jackets shone even more. Rika felt disgusted. Would she ever leave painful thoughts aside or would she be saddled forever with all pain become hers? Many people casually told Rika not to take things too personally but did she have a choice?

“This is how humans get on with life, it is the old law of the jungle. Survival for the fittest! It is life!” Kisheke told her. Kisheke did not confess that he nursed a secret desire to take her out and using her body. He thought this would teach her to be ‘free’. He never said this to anyone for her knew that would land him into trouble. He thought if only Rika had a man in her life, she would not be engaged so passionately in many social issues. He thought she was fascinated by nightlife because she had no night life herself! Given a chance Kisheke would even ask if women knew what they were doing in life. He said they needed ‘fixing’ all the time but would not go into details to explain this. He hid selfish motives in a pretended concerned for her.

“Be normal! People simply put aside what they could not handle. Get rich before you retire!” he said to her. It was obvious that he thought she had no clue about anything. Rika’s eyes stung with pain. Quite dejectedly she remembered that in the rural areas where life was said to be natural, people kept yearning to get to the glitter of the city and touch it. Who could break these chains of misery?

Stalking danger

Cold air and wind entered every part of her dress as she stepped out of Berg-a –Gold Hotel. It pushed in from the bottom and got in to every fold. She felt cleansed. On the cold streets, this same night, Rika knew she hopped between two dangerous Kenyas. The Kenya of the glittering wealthy class and the other Kenya. There was a rift, not just a gap between those who have and those who do not. This rift grew bigger every day. Its manifestation became like many heads on one dragon.

The jewelry on dresses and jackets shone even more. Rika felt disgusted. Would she ever leave painful thoughts aside or would she be saddled forever with all pain become hers? Many people casually told Rika not to take things too personally but did she have a choice?

“This is how humans get on with life, it is the old law of the jungle. Survival for the fittest! It is life!” Kisheke told her. Kisheke did not confess that he nursed a secret desire to take her out and using her body. He thought this would teach her to be ‘free’. He never said this to anyone for her knew that would land him into trouble. He thought if only Rika had a man in her life, she would not be engaged so passionately in many social issues. He thought she was fascinated by nightlife because she had no night life herself! Given a chance Kisheke would even ask if women knew what they were doing in life. He said they needed ‘fixing’ all the time but would not go into details to explain this. He hid selfish motives in a pretended concerned for her.

“Be normal! People simply put aside what they could not handle. Get rich before you retire!” he said to her. It was obvious that he thought she had no clue about anything. Rika’s eyes stung with pain. Quite dejectedly she remembered that in the rural areas where life was said to be natural, people kept yearning to get to the glitter of the city and touch it. Who could break these chains of misery?

Stalking danger

Cold air and wind entered every part of her dress as she stepped out of Berg-a –Gold Hotel. It pushed in from the bottom and got in to every fold. She felt cleansed. On the cold streets, this same night, Rika knew she hopped between two dangerous Kenyas. The Kenya of the glittering wealthy class and the other Kenya. There was a rift, not just a gap between those who have and those who do not. This rift grew bigger every day. Its manifestation became like many heads on one dragon.

Tonight Koinange Street was teeming with desperate girls. She saw some University students she knew among them. She saw the many girls who went quietly into the Grande Corruption Conspiracy Room. From different routes they are all headed there. They come through University Way, Slip Road, Kenyatta Avenue, Kigali Road, Uhuru Highway which all connected easily to Koinange Street. The girls come from all over the city and they lined up in their style as far as Argwings Kodhek road outside of the city centre too.

Her Worship the Gold. For Rika, the question was what was the use of such riches if all they did was hide the gags of young girls whom Her Worship the Gold sold in business to the snaky men? Did this rich woman not have feelings for these girls as she would have for her own daughter? Rika saw again in a flash the skeletons of many women who had been raped when they had flesh go past her mind.

The rich woman's daughter was in big business too. She subtly dealt with the same men her mother worked with and with their sons. She licked her mother's diamonds studs in the tongue every night without fail. She dressed to mesmerize. She had all the jewelry she could ever wish for. Big businessmen were twisted around her fingers till they smelt her varnished and perfumed hands. They stared at her eyes. They remained hypnotized forever as they ogled into her golden pond of connections.

It was not unusual that Rika was alone in the nights. 'The cold days are almost over,' She remembered the weather forecaster saying and then adding, 'But it is still very cold in the nights and will be so for the next two weeks.' She was not going to be out for too long. The previous night Rika had spent many hours on the city pavements, gathering information for her series on Nairobi sex commercial workers. She had come to know the big links with powerful people and this is what she was investigating. She saw the girls. They had learnt how to live in the cold in mini clothes. These days it was not the length of cloth that determined the heat on the body but the quality of the tiny thongs

they wore. Some of them wore tiny shorts. Others were clad in short leggings, they kept warm.

Rika remembered her argument with the editor in the morning.

“Rika, you always use the word prostitute for men. You mix up readers in the mornings!”

“Are men not part of this profession? How can this be a female only profession? Are men to be seen then as employers in this case just because they phone or they go out looking for the girls? They normally have some little money to throw at the girls, for long hours of entertainment!”

“Now, there you go! The feminist in you! This Beijing thing drove women mad about rights,” said the editor.

“I would expect Nguvu not to understand Beijing, but he does. You do not!”

Tension rose high. Rika had hit him hard where it mattered by comparing him to *a man* who knew better but who was considered to be lower in social status, assumed to be less educated.

“Yes, but in about five years, you will see I am right. Tell me who will be talking about Beijing then. Show me if you can then, where the international women’s movement will be. They will come up with something else and drop all this, just wait and see! That is women for you: FGM or FGC, MDGs, mother and child mortality rates, sex boycotts and you just suffer here. They do not scream about the slavery in house girl rapes and incest. They hardly speak about incest even when research has shown that fathers in Kenya are responsible for defiling many daughters. They do not talk about the young desperate boys who will be like the next Mai Mai militias of Congo here at home.”

“I know all that, and more,” Said Rika. She was unperturbed. She knew it was time for the editor to try and show that he knew better than Nguvu. He went on talking and she listened to what she knew.

She knew that in theory, most men know the whole story. It is in practice where they fail. They talk of justice on the streets and then go

home and beat their wives because of this or the other reason. They often castigated efforts whose success was obvious in all world societies no matter what failures there had been. It was embarrassing that this was the mind of many men in high positions.

She knew the editor was angry. She heard it in his rant.

"I know. Young men do not watch societies disintegrating and so politicians, especially but not only male ones, get them quickly on their side once they see them begin to group. The young men do not organise themselves into peaceful groups like the women do in the country. They easily organise seemingly for good but it ends up being to kill and to rape. Rape and kill. Rape and kill. It is women who are to blame you see. They do not teach them at home. Our middle class women do not even warn the poor on the slavery that is the Afrikan hair today, this is a new colony. They are slaves! Skin abuse... fffff all the women! They hide much rottenness beneath huge headgear and glittering jewels. The learned women do not say in public that they are often beaten up by their husbands because that sounds bad. I know power will be with women when they can identify the flea that bites them and kill it. They say that you cannot kill a louse with one finger. But how can you even begin to think of killing it or even finding another finger to help if you do not know where the louse is in the first place? We men are nothing Rika when you stand up to us with evidence. Tradition says you do not believe the words of women till the night has passed, but people do not remember that this is because the word of woman is irrevocable!"

Rika was not impressed. She knew the power of women and that was undebatable even looking at her own life. What she could not understand is what made some men think that when women work the men should not. That they could leave all social problems to women like they had done in the past with kitchens. She could not understand why they thought that all efforts also on their part to change things were not needed. What did he mean by 'stand up to men with evidence'? Were women sitting down? Were men this blind? She wondered. The

editor did not even note that the hair question was not to do with women only. He was obsessed with women this and women that.

Her answer was a question.

“Why should it be women speaking about all these problems that you see so clearly yourself and men almost always sitting in the highest offices? Why should women deal with all the problems you listed before? Did they start them on their own? Many men are sell outs to the government of the day which are men’s domains anywhere. I hope you see the connections that I see. A man in power must immediately become also a woman and mother! If you really believed in what you have just said, you would not underrate my take on things, my work... do stop patronising me!”

Rika knew how to manage her gates. She had given him no more time. She knew she was not going to play along teaching him about not using the ‘f’ word in the office. That was a ‘no goal’ if he thought he scored and if it was a goal then he it was an ‘own goal’. Own goals always proved that competition had its limitations. For Rika, there was no match to play about women issues. All media had to get involved with the same commitment. It was not a matter of women versus men.

Rika went along thinking about so much that she saw and heard. She was not cold any more. Street life was dynamic and complex minute to minute. The shining woman and her daughter were in a league of their own in this game. Most of the girls came to the men to eke out a living, to work. Rika could hear every word, see it and taste it as Mwangaza had related it to her.

“Come on in!” A man’s voice said. He had opened the front door of his Prado where his wife normally sat. Mwangaza fell in with her little shorts and immediately he started touching her thighs. He smacked his lips and made other sounds of delightful expectation. A short drive and they are in a room. Designer buckles swish open and a quick tug slides his tie knot down fast. The loop widens and he pulls his expensive tie over his head and keeps it close to her head. It could be of help if she

begun to shout. Once the quiet room envelops them, all seems well. But after a while, it is not the same. He changes suddenly. Strange breathing and fire comes out of the man. He turns into a ravenous beast. He tears off her clothes. She is not worried. She always carried a set for change.

In her mind, she is already at the 'meaningful' end for her. She is wondering if he would pay. Would she get paid? He had promised to pay rates '*without kapote*' but he used '*without kabuti*' which means a coat but both in the context meant without a condom. Then the beast started to tear her up. He pulled her hair. She felt she was being cut right inside. He was seething with rage. She imagined poison and infection going to all parts of her body. She realised he was now driving a cold bottle into her. "There!" He shouted. "There!" She can feel this bottle is broken on its edges. "There! what did you think I would give you in the end? Money? Haaaa? You animal!" She heard and felt no more.

Rika had listened to her keenly. This story remained as if recorded on on her mind. She thought that men who did these things were completely normal, not insane as you would think, not mentally sick in the ordinary meaning of the word. True they did strange things. Some of them even removed the girls' nail varnish with their own hard male nails in a beastly licking orgy. The clothes could be replaced, nails varnished again and wigs purchased but never the insides and souls of these girls who always held out shining clothes and cheerful faces to the world. She tried to think about the reasons why.

What was it with these sadists? It was still the dance of the two snakes, Rika could see. The men who mistreated girls and women- it seemed that their deep anger was with some huge being that they could not dominate. Maybe they were angry with the world. Were they fighting something else? Some subtlety showed that some of them were

hurting the girls, but deep inside, they were tearing at the images of their own accomplished and powerful wives. Women who went to work and made or earned money by the sweat of their brow and raked in higher incomes did not please these men.

They said women such as these, even when they were their wives were prostitutes and that they were all like Maya and her mother and aimed to be like the powerful woman and her daughter. Had power destroyed such men so much that they could not bear to see a woman who had power over her own body? Was this innate selfishness, Rika wondered, or was it power that had so destroyed these men that they could not bear to see women who were free and capable, women who showed up with results? Rika thought someday she would take a short psychology course.

She knew many well-to-do men who did not go to the streets for girls but who beat up their wives at home. It did not matter that they were educated. They wanted to see all women behaving the same. They wanted them mostly to behave like the call girls –a name they often used for them because this meant that men called and they brought themselves! Power impacted on people in more ways than anyone on earth could tell. Night and day, the underworld was of a character that even the males involved in it did not comprehend.

Many men thought this is where they did what they wanted. They had eaten enough ordinary and extraordinary foods and supplements. They took special energy medicine. Some had exceedingly fat tummies. Their hearts found it hard to get blood to all parts of their bodies. These men did not see girls on the streets. They saw things on sale. Tonight, Rika could understand this partly. She saw girls who looked like living ads straight off the TV screen; lighting up Nairobi just like they did the rest of the cities of the world; leading the night how they knew best.

Handling the swoop and the law

Sometimes rich men and women paraded these girls in hotel rooms. Sometimes, everything happened in the quiet and leafy suburbs where ordinary people did not easily set foot. You could see ordinary workers there, scurrying to work for rich people but they were instructed to count their steps to and from work. Not a single step more, not a single step less, and yet their salaries rarely came on time. The salaries remained the same for years. There were areas of the houses such workers were not allowed to visit. They had to clean all the toilets. The watchmen were under instructions pronounced between sips of vodka, never to leak any information. They were told to look after security but threatened with the pain of death if any information were to go missing and be found somewhere out there, they would be answerable for theft by servant! 'Theft by servant' were the legal terms used in the law also here in Kenya.

The Kenyan court accused girls who walked the streets at night of 'hawking' services to men. They would be arrested alone; not with the men. Only the girls on the streets and in brothels were arrested. If you could afford enough money to pay for ads that used women as objects, no one would arrest you for that was not 'hawking'. You were in big business. If you could shield yourself in Berg-a Gold, you could hawk children. Nobody would or could arrest you. Not especially if you were a friend of big politicians.

"I hear a lot of money is flooding in through classified ads," Nguvu said to Rika.

"Yes, that is true."

"But what is this *mashaj* that is sold to people? It is always advertised below the second car ads in the classified lines."

Rika knew what he was talking about. Some people knew that the small classified ads in the respected daily newspapers advertised special care in massage parlors.

“My sister got a job to clean one of those *mashaj* and she came home crying saying it is better to starve. Now am still looking for a job for her. Sister, where is it safe for her to work? Help me! What do we know these days we people who work less with the pen and *kampiutas*?”

Rika knew of girls on the street who sometimes found jobs big hotels where they became special masseuse. But nobody paid for their medical cover. When she discussed this with some friends they said all this was from the West where people are rich, arrogant and intolerant. She knew of old men, this mainly happened with non- nationals, who chose two or three young girls and rented a small flat near the city for their ‘business’. They took these girls for testing every few months. It sounded as if they were being tested like cars for services which they also were but they were mainly screened for HIV. The girls knew that they day they would test positive for a venereal disease they would die. Our men and women were copying what rich people did with money abroad, some Kenyans said.

Rika knew some of these massage parlours were not too far off from the Arboretum on State House Road. Latest cars sped there and seemed to do break dance as they sped and braked. They would break in short distances like a chain of displayed precious stones along different avenues leading to small flats and apartments. Some would think it was a trade showcase. Vintage cars shone there, others would think there was a car competition coming up.

These rich people were never arrested. Some of these men rich men sometimes used clean taxis, seeming official; and the cops never hail down such taxis. The poorer looking cabs were always hailed down and inspected as the driver trembled and pulled a hard sisal cord belt up and down. You could see them if you looked keenly. Each time the taxi driver tried to make the belt settle on his hips, it slid off as his lips curled upwards. It fell straight to his groin.

Many lives had become part of Rika’s life. These were deeply etched in her soul and there they lived in more dimensions than three. They

were life; limitless in its flow. For others, it was all about a photograph in the papers. People pointed excitedly at a photograph of a blue pick-up full of well dressed women now frequent in the newspapers. Arrested *malaya*, prostitutes, they would say. Sometimes the arrests made for a small feature on TV. Police would be seen guns cocked, ready to shoot these women they called criminals if they dared to try to escape.

“You are not scandalised Nguvu and am glad. These girls should not be raped and killed. If they have to sell themselves should it at least not be for a negotiated official price? Should there not be a law for their protection? Those who want to live on others must learn to pay their own taxes. Our black people stand out as the prostitutes in Europe too. I have seen them abandoned in remote vineyards with mattresses, our sisters lying there trying to catch a dollar. But we cannot live like that. We must not think that Koinange Street ends here in Nairobi. Nguvu, talk to your sister. Ask her to go to hospital for a check up. If we do not speak, we shall all die in this. We cannot insist on taboo topics now. We must talk with, discuss sex matters with our children. When a society is unequal, sexuality suffers a big blow. What you see here in with our sisters on the street is how Afrika is seen in the world!

“You are the brave ones. The ones with the keys that unlock these things,” Nguvu said. “Among us men we boast that we are better than this or that person. We live in competition. Kikeshe has threatened me for taking you to work but I know the law. He cannot do what he thinks.

Speaking streets

As she walked along the streets, the history of women in Kenya spoke to Rika. People spoke about single women as a ‘phenomenon’ that sprang up mainly after the Kenyan Emergency and Mau Mau struggle for independence when men were detained. Rika knew that all sorts of

were life; limitless in its flow. For others, it was all about a photograph in the papers. People pointed excitedly at a photograph of a blue pick-up full of well dressed women now frequent in the newspapers. Arrested *malaya*, prostitutes, they would say. Sometimes the arrests made for a small feature on TV. Police would be seen guns cocked, ready to shoot these women they called criminals if they dared to try to escape.

“You are not scandalised Nguvu and am glad. These girls should not be raped and killed. If they have to sell themselves should it at least not be for a negotiated official price? Should there not be a law for their protection? Those who want to live on others must learn to pay their own taxes. Our black people stand out as the prostitutes in Europe too. I have seen them abandoned in remote vineyards with mattresses, our sisters lying there trying to catch a dollar. But we cannot live like that. We must not think that Koinange Street ends here in Nairobi. Nguvu, talk to your sister. Ask her to go to hospital for a check up. If we do not speak, we shall all die in this. We cannot insist on taboo topics now. We must talk with, discuss sex matters with our children. When a society is unequal, sexuality suffers a big blow. What you see here in with our sisters on the street is how Afrika is seen in the world!

“You are the brave ones. The ones with the keys that unlock these things,” Nguvu said. “Among us men we boast that we are better than this or that person. We live in competition. Kikeshe has threatened me for taking you to work but I know the law. He cannot do what he thinks.

Speaking streets

As she walked along the streets, the history of women in Kenya spoke to Rika. People spoke about single women as a ‘phenomenon’ that sprang up mainly after the Kenyan Emergency and Mau Mau struggle for independence when men were detained. Rika knew that all sorts of

women always existed but that their diversity was often overlooked. What became of so many women left at home during the World Wars when Afrikan soldiers were taken by the British to fight in Burma? Women were so easily classified by all and in all tongues and made to fit into small boxes. They were seen to be there quietly absorbed and holding up society that had no room for them as women. In the past they were accepted if they became mothers, but now, not all single women were getting babies. Single women even when they had babies were seen as outsiders. When they died, some said, their burial place was outside the fence of the family compound. Such women were taboo. Such women had increased even more with deaths caused by malaria, TB and HIV Aids opportunistic infections.

“My sister came home to marry herself,” Rika, said Nguvu. “Now I have some money to educate my daughter. Maybe we can find her a simple and cheap college?”

“Marry herself? You mean this issue has gone this far?”

“Yes, even a Catholic nun in our neighbourhood came home to marry herself and return to the convent.”

“We are just trying to make sure that everyone belongs somewhere since our values are fast disappearing!”

“But don’t your sisters also have children whom they are trying to educate? Is it always the men who have responsibilities and who must receive the money?”

“We take care of our families. See what I want to do for our younger Sis?”

“That is you, Nguvu. How many men have died these last months from taking cheap brews laced with methanol and they say also jet fuel?”

“Last week, twenty six of them died in my village. Eighteen went blind!”

“Some women have died too but these are few. Women do not need men to allow them to be and to use their bodies. In fact, you will

agree with me that too many men abuse women, even when they do not rape them. There is deep silence about crimes against women. We have to work to change lives. Men never have to marry themselves...regardless of being bachelors or widowers. Men are receivers of money made from marriage. A man paid dowry to other men, not to women, how could he marry himself? Women who married themselves paid dowry to men unless there were no men in the family. Sometimes the man of the family was very young but somehow the land and the money found their way to him-passing many older sisters- just like a prince must be found to inherit the throne if a kingdom is to survive!"

"You are right. Sometimes there are serious fights about these things. The chiefs of the villages get to hear many things but unless the local chiefs are women, many things that damage women, and reflect badly on men are not reported!"

Thinking of the debate on taxing prostitution, Rika knew many would tell you that such a thing was far from being done in Kenya. People said that those things are done in strange countries where men lured men through TV and Internet and where women slept with women. They said such things are done where many people even if some males do, do not get circumcised! That it happened where people were not taught about sexuality whilst wounded in their private parts which is what they said they did during circumcision. Well educated people who circumcised their sons refused to see this as a purely medical affair. They thought that all of a sudden you could teach young people more about sex during a rite of passage. Maybe they were right, but are not the best lessons learnt little by little in a natural environment and without pain daily?

Rika knew that the girls on the streets looking for money were bright. They understood that the underworld is not always in dark places and slums. They knew there was an underworld even where lights twinkled best. They also knew how to handle their issues. For them, it did not matter what they were charged with in the law courts when

they were arraigned in Makadara and Kibera. They knew their own law and how to make it hurt them less.

“Let me tell, you,” Deni who had been arrested the previous night was heard by Rika warning the girls, “If you have never been arrested again, this is the trick. Say yes, to everything they charge you with!”

“Aaaaah?” questioned the voice of one new to the streets.

“Yes, this is how to handle the swoop. If they say you are a prostitute you say ‘yes’ and pay 500 shillings and you can go home, if you say ‘no’ thinking to fight for your morality, you will be incarcerated in Lang’ata Women’s prison for fourteen days, and that is hard! Think of your children. It is tough!”

Rika strained in the darkening cell to see her. Deni’s face reminded Rika of an ancient five cent coin. Yes, the very old cent which had a hole in the centre. The one Kenyans never forgot, and the coin some called *Dururu*. She used to hold up her hair in the centre of her head in a big bun. Her hair looked hurt and brownish. Only the artificial raffia additions which she sometimes picked up from rubbish bins shone black in her hair. Her hair looked bigger than her whole body.

“Don’t worry my sisters,” said a second slow and compassionate voice. It was Mercy speaking. “We shall one day beat these hyenas at their own game. Do not expect justice here where they never charge the men of robbing us with violence which they so often do!” Shouted Mercy. Rika was hit by the irony. Robbery with violence carries a death sentence in Kenya.

Chatting with some of these girls was easy for Rika. In her next stories she wanted to write about the men, the rich women and politicians. She did not want to write about the well known story of the men who lured girls downtown, and the girls who took men easily, but of the men who put girls in big cars and drove them out of town happily. The type that snaked their way into the suburbs in cars that hugged the

ground rolling strong; as they cast shifting glances at their catch. They lived with the glittering snakes in them, these men, stealing dances all the time. Rika would follow the *bling-bling* men of billions of dollars and diamonds. She knew that most of the girls who were picked up on the streets walked to work from the slums. The slums, suburbs, poor rural areas, rich rural zones, posh hotels were married by danger.

It was impossible to tell how the underworld would tango with the upperworld and if anybody would survive this dance. It was the dance of two big snakes to whom all were beholden. Rika often traveled incognito by night; she needed to and she loved doing it. She did her work with the passion of one who is called to live for a cause and this none, had to be told, it dripped into every conversation she had. All those who talked with her about her work knew it. She never counted the cost. Her salary could never pay for her enthusiasm and for leading the night.

When she reached home, Rika switched off the TV which Wajibu, her House Assistant, had left blaring. Before she slept, Rika turned the last page of The Sabat News. Her story had been carried well this time. It was the story of Deni. Nothing political, the editor must have thought. She remembered her last interview with the girls. She remembered that some people had already sent 'hot' e-mails with human rights activist calling in to the newsroom, to express concern about Deni. She smiled. Rika asked them to suggest actions to curb another old problem, male teachers who made their students pregnant.

The Song of Deni

At 13, Deni is the youngest sex commercial worker Rika ever met. She narrated to her keen ear how she left school after the teacher made her pregnant at ten years of age. From the way she told her story, Rika

ground rolling strong; as they cast shifting glances at their catch. They lived with the glittering snakes in them, these men, stealing dances all the time. Rika would follow the *bling-bling* men of billions of dollars and diamonds. She knew that most of the girls who were picked up on the streets walked to work from the slums. The slums, suburbs, poor rural areas, rich rural zones, posh hotels were married by danger.

It was impossible to tell how the underworld would tango with the upperworld and if anybody would survive this dance. It was the dance of two big snakes to whom all were beholden. Rika often traveled incognito by night; she needed to and she loved doing it. She did her work with the passion of one who is called to live for a cause and this none, had to be told, it dripped into every conversation she had. All those who talked with her about her work knew it. She never counted the cost. Her salary could never pay for her enthusiasm and for leading the night.

When she reached home, Rika switched off the TV which Wajibu, her House Assistant, had left blaring. Before she slept, Rika turned the last page of The Sabat News. Her story had been carried well this time. It was the story of Deni. Nothing political, the editor must have thought. She remembered her last interview with the girls. She remembered that some people had already sent 'hot' e-mails with human rights activist calling in to the newsroom, to express concern about Deni. She smiled. Rika asked them to suggest actions to curb another old problem, male teachers who made their students pregnant.

The Song of Deni

At 13, Deni is the youngest sex commercial worker Rika ever met. She narrated to her keen ear how she left school after the teacher made her pregnant at ten years of age. From the way she told her story, Rika

knew at once she was very intelligent. Deni, whose name means debt, always tells her story of pain after her parents threw her out of their home when she was five months pregnant as if it is happening to her now. She has forgotten the pain of childbirth; but she has not forgotten the pain of being pregnant, it is as if she became pregnant forever. She cannot forget trying to hide a bulging belly in a green school cardigan. She had not known how to hide such a foreign thing to her. A bulging stomach; a baby with a baby. Her song, which was like a lullaby to Deni's own baby senses, went over chapped dry lower lip drying it more:

*Teacher, teacher, you say am bright,
and am growing, growing strong.
Teacher, teacher you marked the wrong right,
and you told me to come, to come.
Teacher, teacher to your own house,
to collect the books! The books, the books!
Teacher, teacher you hold me down tight,
and you smell me! Smile and smell.*

*Teacher you teach me present tense,
what presence is here? What is really here?
Teacher you teach me past tense,
teach me past tense, what past is this?
I know am past.
I told you my uncle abused me,
You forced your turn to explain.*

*Teacher you teach me future tense,
what future is here? I am so tired.
Tell me teacher, tell me, tell me, tell me teacher,
you taught me tenses, I don't know if I am here,*

*You took my senses!
I feel not, I feel too much, I feel not, I feel too much!*

What future was here indeed? Was Deni born to be an object of male abuse all her life? Chopped song of the bush, Rika called her. Rika's responded in song:

*Why was Deni born?
Why was she a mother?
Whose debt is this?
Was she born to be a mother?
All her life? And after that;
to sleep with people she did not care for,
all her life?*

She must have, Rika thought, resigned to her duty the way a prison toilet cleaner in Kenya does. The prison toilet cleaner sings;

*Just do it.
It will pass.
And then I will get money, and one day,
I will go, go, go, go!*

Rika's knowledge of the dark spiderweb was so deep. It was connected by many insights found in the lights of the night. She knew that all these girls, from Deni the incest and rape survivor, Maya the girl who is taken by the rich man in the street, her Mother who is taken by the *bling- bling* lover; to the girls who are taken on suburban escapades; were all caught in a web whose complete pictures and connections so few people could see. She thought of silly rich men who believed they bought love, but who would get a woman who was only doing her work, the same way she could clean a messed up toilet.

How Deni was connected with *bling- bling* men in posh hotels and powerful women who wore diamonds daily, Deni would never know. It seemed that her first fault was to be born where she was, and her second was to go to school where she was born. It was at home and in school she was robbed with violence. Rape and incest had a geographical regional pattern. No priests spoke much about that in local churches. They did not mention the word 'rape' because they said it defiled the altar. The alleluias had to be sang and the people blessed. In Deni's life, no Good Samaritan stopped by to dress her wounds. Her mother did not take her father to court, she hushed Deni and went on praising her husband's strength and power. The school wanted to be first in academic results in the Republic and it never checked on teachers. And who would chastise them in public? That would ruin the name of the school whose motto was, "Unto the Stars".

Deni did some day confess to the local parish priest what she called her sins. He gave her very hard penances. One Sunday, she told her enquiring mother that she felt too heavy to go to church on Sundays. She did not sleep late into any morning, even then, not even those Sunday mornings. She began to wash dishes on Sunday mornings and to sing sadly. One Saturday evening she got lost in the city. She never went back home.

Years later, what Deni knows is that she is angry inside, even when she smiles. Her story, the one she tells all the time is her painkiller which is only efficacious sometimes. The more she speaks about herself, the angrier she gets everyday. She says her child died in its grandfather's hands, but she always felt it was dead inside her. 'Child died and am dead inside,' is a song she is sometimes heard singing as she sweeps a slum hotel and weeps. She makes up the words as she goes along. They hiss.

Deni killed men with broken glasses when they had tried to 'play' with her in slum bars. She hissed three words, "Cut like thisssss!" She showed her friends how she did it with the hiss of words and a mean

face. In such moments, the middle of her cheeks rose in two peaked temples, but the sides fell to her chin. Her eyebrows peaked too. She hissed again and again and said; ‘like thissssss!’ while crossing her old iron ringed forefinger over her own neck! Her dark face gleamed and shone in the partly moonlit night. Who would lead her special night?

Day hidden in night

After three days, on another night, Rika stepped out. It was a night on which Deni hissed. Her hissing seemed to have taken over the entire city, and the rural areas as well. Everything hissed pain. The hiss was loudest in the slums muting the kisses of betrayal in the suburbs. It was a noisy and consistent hiss. Something in the air told of this night’s menacing mood.

Rika could not believe she was out again. But here she was. This night had beckoned her to work. Perhaps this is the night that would never end as it was made by the day, she thought to herself; and it really was a part of day.

Just when she turned to Nguvu to tell him how trying this night would be, this ominous night, she found him ringing his forehead from a breaking sweat that traveled down furrows all over his forehead fast.

“I have a serious headache, I think I have malaria,” Nguvu said.

She nodded.

“Don’t diagnose yourself. Go and see a doctor, she said, thinking how often people treated HIV infection with malaria tablets. What to do with being in the middle of so much? Her stream of thoughts was unstoppable. She knew that sometimes when infection started, and long before sero-positivity, one was hit by a malaria -like disease that disappeared in hours. But the clinics where most people went to seek treatment for all ailments did not always test for HIV/AIDS virus.

face. In such moments, the middle of her cheeks rose in two peaked temples, but the sides fell to her chin. Her eyebrows peaked too. She hissed again and again and said; ‘like thissssss!’ while crossing her old iron ringed forefinger over her own neck! Her dark face gleamed and shone in the partly moonlit night. Who would lead her special night?

Day hidden in night

After three days, on another night, Rika stepped out. It was a night on which Deni hissed. Her hissing seemed to have taken over the entire city, and the rural areas as well. Everything hissed pain. The hiss was loudest in the slums muting the kisses of betrayal in the suburbs. It was a noisy and consistent hiss. Something in the air told of this night’s menacing mood.

Rika could not believe she was out again. But here she was. This night had beckoned her to work. Perhaps this is the night that would never end as it was made by the day, she thought to herself; and it really was a part of day.

Just when she turned to Nguvu to tell him how trying this night would be, this ominous night, she found him ringing his forehead from a breaking sweat that traveled down furrows all over his forehead fast.

“I have a serious headache, I think I have malaria,” Nguvu said.

She nodded.

“Don’t diagnose yourself. Go and see a doctor, she said, thinking how often people treated HIV infection with malaria tablets. What to do with being in the middle of so much? Her stream of thoughts was unstoppable. She knew that sometimes when infection started, and long before sero-positivity, one was hit by a malaria -like disease that disappeared in hours. But the clinics where most people went to seek treatment for all ailments did not always test for HIV/AIDS virus.

No one spoke out on this. In their parliamentary sessions, Honorable Members preferred to discuss diamonds, roses and wines. Even when bird flu and later swine flu came, they were still talking about their salary increment and how to be exempted from most taxes. They were busy celebrating the taste of exotic wines in foreign missions when jet set and when home bound.

Nguvu dashed off quickly and began to throw up; a good sign that this was an ordinary infection. His temperature was running high. It was half past ten in the night. Rika soldiered on after calling Wajibu who said that she, Uhai and Hariri, Rika's children, were fine. Homework completed, the children were fast asleep in bed. Wajibu who was taking a part- time accounts course which Rika paid for was studying now.

Rika would have to go on courageously without Nguvu who doubled up as her security when he was available. She remembered the night her late mother had slept outside, in between two banana plantations to find out who was throwing stones that made a raucous on the tin roof of their house every night at the same time. She remembered how it turned out to be a woman they had given room to use their granary and kitchen which were separate from their main house. People in the village had said it was the Devil himself who was throwing such stones, but Rika's mother dared them still and she went outside, braved the chill and solved the problem. Her mother had done this herself, not her father even as many said no women were watchmen. To be a watchman did you need to be at the door watching? Strategy is power. The woman who threw the stones was found to have kept cheap brew in old sacks in the granary. She returned to her own village the next day.

As soon as you saw her, you would immediately suppose she was out for an evening walk, but Rika was in the city in her long clothes; often underestimated for their power. She was dressed in a long Ethiopian creamish women's costume with a jacket and a shawl. She walked around

feeling as safe as if she were inside a tower. Her red lipstick on a coat of powder a hue darker than her skin did it. She looked different. She toughened up and embraced this night to lead alone as if in the footsteps of her mother. As she walked, many more nights came to her mind.

There was the night at the terrace of the 'Awinja Star Safari Hotel' when dressed in a *bui bui* and she had stayed up into the wee hours of the morning. She enjoyed observing the tough speaking traders. The golden men, the men of diamonds, who spoke Arabic and dressed in fine open chest gray suits; and their big *bling -bling* chains on their necks. They had been on TV for days, every evening and on lunch time news, they were there, again and again grinning and shining.

That night of the *bui bui*, they were in a meeting with the same powerful and well connected woman. The article she wrote after that was the one that brought some men to her flat's doorstep one afternoon. A waiter had tipped the shining men that the woman in a *bui bui* sitting at the hotel's café had taped the conversations between the powerful business men and the woman who hit the headlines for a long time years later, for involvement in human trafficking.

That afternoon two men appeared at her flat, the men had pretended to be just checking the electric power meter but Wajibu felt strange about them. She noted a number of odd things. The men looked strange. They held in their hands some soft black caps. They pretended that these caps were part of their motorbike helmets. Wajibu knew they were not. Rika recognized the caps as balaclavas. Wajibu described them well saying that their jackets seemed too big at the waists and that they looked alike. Rika felt a cold chill go down her back as she confirmed that danger lurked even if she had not been picked up. Those men were armed.

Editorials were silent on the fine links between corruption and ethnicity, religions, cults and insecurity. They did not like radicals. The unspoken media policy indicated clearly that one did not criticize the owner of a media enterprise and survive to still eat and drink well and

drive the same good car. It paid to be a humble foot soldier. For them, it paid to forget those studies. It paid to forget, they thought, a famous book and one of the few Rika liked to re-read: *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Freire. For the others, it paid to forget all that crap about ideology, oppression, solidarity and rights. It paid to forget that play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, by Ngugi and Micere. These were contemporary times and revolutions, even though Castro was still alive, had died. It looked like writers enjoyed living in exile anyway, since they got used to fast trains and did not return home where risks were unpredictable.

Media bosses praised local progress in freedom of expression and said they fought for a democratic country and all freedoms and that they had got it. They gave space to those who talked about government in general but not to those who named names. Members of Parliament phoned to ask why an article claimed they were booed down in their constituencies. Some of them filed a case to stop comedians from imitating them. They won. They were paid millions of shillings for having endured ridicule. Libel laws were the padlocks of free expression.

It was fine to have writers complain in polite letters and poems that spoke about flowers and beautiful blue skies. It was not sound to have some activists express their views. Some journalists lost their jobs while others moved in the available triangle of big publications before setting up their own jobs. Editors were uncomfortable with fine and fearless research done by journalists who were never distracted from their stories even when they were offered a chance to report the beauty of the wonder of the animal migration at the Maasai Mara. No one published their stories with long whistle blowing details. Rika knew that even at work she was in danger. She decided to always have Nguvu with her on her research trips. For sometime, Rika stopped working by night. The death of a nation's social fabric sang the song of fear in so many tunes and voices.

face. In such moments, the middle of her cheeks rose in two peaked temples, but the sides fell to her chin. Her eyebrows peaked too. She hissed again and again and said; ‘like thissssss!’ while crossing her old iron ringed forefinger over her own neck! Her dark face gleamed and shone in the partly moonlit night. Who would lead her special night?

Day hidden in night

After three days, on another night, Rika stepped out. It was a night on which Deni hissed. Her hissing seemed to have taken over the entire city, and the rural areas as well. Everything hissed pain. The hiss was loudest in the slums muting the kisses of betrayal in the suburbs. It was a noisy and consistent hiss. Something in the air told of this night’s menacing mood.

Rika could not believe she was out again. But here she was. This night had beckoned her to work. Perhaps this is the night that would never end as it was made by the day, she thought to herself; and it really was a part of day.

Just when she turned to Nguvu to tell him how trying this night would be, this ominous night, she found him ringing his forehead from a breaking sweat that traveled down furrows all over his forehead fast.

“I have a serious headache, I think I have malaria,” Nguvu said.

She nodded.

“Don’t diagnose yourself. Go and see a doctor, she said, thinking how often people treated HIV infection with malaria tablets. What to do with being in the middle of so much? Her stream of thoughts was unstoppable. She knew that sometimes when infection started, and long before sero-positivity, one was hit by a malaria -like disease that disappeared in hours. But the clinics where most people went to seek treatment for all ailments did not always test for HIV/AIDS virus.

Sabasaba Defence Force

Frustrated, Rika began to understand why some journalists only smoked and drank and never spoke. The Sabasaba Defence Force, was said to be strangling and killing people. The men with money were said to be capable of completely crushing a newspaper or media house and putting it out of business. They danced like snakes with glee imposing fear. They had no time for clever and clean brains sitting in worn pant seats and strapping the goodness of their spirits in heart crossing suspenders.

The *Lukiimam* were ruthless. The trick was the same. Once they failed to buy all journalists to cover them in the way they wanted, they would storm into a media house with guns and kill. They identified weak links in the society and exploited them quickly pretending to fulfil their desires. They knew of some journalists of whom it was said that in the building of the Berg-a- Gold hotel they had sold their pens for very little to become builders...stonemasons. They would get these to turn into journalists again, get them to infiltrate media houses and leak information to them. The day what was to be published went against the Twins, the media involved would be attacked.

These shining men said they were unquestionably tough. They could stop print or broadcasts and they demonstrated this with one media house to intimidate all others. They succeeded. Balaclava clad they stormed in and destroyed what they did not want.

Rika had another deep concern. She had information at her fingertips regarding a gang operation and she wanted it published. She was warned that this gang was related to Sabasaba Defence Force. Her story was tossed from editor to editor until it reached the manager. The manager said he would not have the story published following his junior's views. He too was afraid.

His opinion was to run one story about gangsters killing and skinning people every now and then. It would keep the public busy guessing. But no one knew for certain who carried out such grisly deaths

which made such a loud statement causing fear from door to door. Rika would have liked to lie in waiting in the bushes and see what really happened and who did it, but it was impossible to know which area would be struck next. Without support from Sabat News, she could not do this story. She could not get help. She feared for the land.

Entire villages were paralysed with fear. Rika kept her skeptical mind to herself. She was troubled that she could no longer trust policemen who used to help her when she had difficult fact finding work to do. She could not count on them now; not anymore. Not since the gang issues got so complex and evil seemed to spread its tentacles all over turning everything it touched into mystery, closing avenues for dialogue, leaving no room for open discussions. Not since TVs were too happy to focus only on *bling-bling* shine and to do it how the rich men told them to. It was too hard, people seemed not to know that one could not have a little injustice and fight big injustice.

The ring of power and mystery stamped different people in different ways every night. Rika was stamped to fight. The *bling-bling* people had their style, the woman of power and her deals; the girls had and the men had their battles, no one was left out. The majority of the people in the cities crouched with fear even as they drove big cars. The gangs had transformed into militias, and some said they worked with some police. Could this be left lying untouched?

No one knew at all how to deal with these groups. They were at first organized for a return to their roots and for taking a fresh breath of liberation, but ended up stamped for money and power. Deep fear set in. Fear cast out reason and confusion reigned. In the end, no one knew exactly what the gangs who began to team up with other gangs wanted. Some police squads were set up and they crushed them, but they never vanquished them. Some politicians kept close to the gangs and honored them in private but denied membership and turned against them in public adding to the confusion. The clergy was moved to lend an ear to the militias but again turned against them claiming that the gangs would be seen to have power over them if they listened to them.

In turn, the group changed identity endlessly. Their power to mutate could only be compared to that of a virus. Some of their members became leaders in churches that were formed overnight. The group slyly took over police functions and also worked with some policemen. Initially, in the slums the 'good militia' won the confidence of the people by telling them that they trained all against rape and all petty crime. Women were happy believing salvation had come from their own children. Men too rejoiced.

While those who claimed openly to be gang members in the neighborhoods said they dissuaded young boys against crime, in secret it was not clear what they really taught them. The fruits their work bore contradicted their word. The results were poor. But they said they stood for three pillars: No stealing. No rape, and no lying. And yet, not all of them could reveal their identity. They beat the police in round one, so that residents sometimes openly declared they felt better protected by militia compared to police who stole, raped and were so violent, killing even a baby in a cot with tear gas in Mathare. No one knew how quickly crime binds and blinds.

Yet some other deaths were unexplained and strange. The spirit of defiance and the belittling of life to glorify death set the gang apart. If one breached the confidence of the gang, one had to die. Death was not seen as violence by the group. It was a way and an accepted end long before it came. Its inevitability seemed to open doors for great hardness of spirit. They were not afraid that some police killed so many people. They were only concerned about their work, which no one understood anymore. The country, Rika felt was lost in darkness. Perhaps the snakes were tied in a knot. Some policemen wanted badges and decorations made of diamonds and gold. They said they too wanted to wield that kind of material power. Many people believed in power only when it could be seen in wealth. The police were poorly paid. Senior officers who expected to be saluted even on the streets had large beer bellies. Their small and squalid living quarters were often shared between

families. When they heard Deni singing her story, her song, they laughed and laughed all day long and into the night. They said they knew how these things that happened to Deni came to occur, but they did not know how to handle them.

The snake dance of those who preferred material wealth to anything else had almost destroyed all hope. Helplessness grew. There were some who were described as 'good officers' but they worked within a police force infiltrated by gangs and corrupted to the hilt. It was bewildering, it was said some of the gang militia members were well educated. The gang had a philosophy which made sense to minds seeking for change. The knot choking the nation became tighter. Maybe it was the two snakes that were choking the country. Maybe the two snakes had given birth to many baby snakes. Nothing but fear was certain.

Gang power

The gang Leader and his helpers did not hide their identity and presence all the time but their members did. Like in all other powerful institutions in the world, they knew that information is power. Sometimes they allowed interviews and sometimes they did not. They would give information to journalists but always in a way that left the journalists more disconcerted than when they started to research on the morphing groups. Scholars published papers on the internet. University students began to write theses on the phenomenon. It was always hard to penetrate the gangs which now embraced other smaller gangs in different locations.

The gang members dealt with information quite skillfully. It was their intention that nobody could feel they had complete knowledge of them. It seemed that they needed to have a mystery which confounded everyone and left their neighbours so confused that they would choose not to speak to their own children in case they were part of the gang. No one could be completely informed about them. A daring

families. When they heard Deni singing her story, her song, they laughed and laughed all day long and into the night. They said they knew how these things that happened to Deni came to occur, but they did not know how to handle them.

The snake dance of those who preferred material wealth to anything else had almost destroyed all hope. Helplessness grew. There were some who were described as 'good officers' but they worked within a police force infiltrated by gangs and corrupted to the hilt. It was bewildering, it was said some of the gang militia members were well educated. The gang had a philosophy which made sense to minds seeking for change. The knot choking the nation became tighter. Maybe it was the two snakes that were choking the country. Maybe the two snakes had given birth to many baby snakes. Nothing but fear was certain.

Gang power

The gang Leader and his helpers did not hide their identity and presence all the time but their members did. Like in all other powerful institutions in the world, they knew that information is power. Sometimes they allowed interviews and sometimes they did not. They would give information to journalists but always in a way that left the journalists more disconcerted than when they started to research on the morphing groups. Scholars published papers on the internet. University students began to write theses on the phenomenon. It was always hard to penetrate the gangs which now embraced other smaller gangs in different locations.

The gang members dealt with information quite skillfully. It was their intention that nobody could feel they had complete knowledge of them. It seemed that they needed to have a mystery which confounded everyone and left their neighbours so confused that they would choose not to speak to their own children in case they were part of the gang. No one could be completely informed about them. A daring

documentary producer ended his productions with many questions. The gang made local reporters news robots and kept them down.

At one time, even after having agreed to tell their story under false names, the Leader of the gang had insisted that some information he gave was not to be seen in print. One editor who had become a little bolder did not heed the Leader's instructions. The Leader rang the newspaper using his full name and naming the journalist who interviewed them incognito and wrote the story under a pen name with all her three official names.

The journalist had introduced herself to the interviewees using a different name. She even told them that she came from near Lake Turkana and not from the coast as many people in Kenya had assumed. She had no office tag on her. They played on and she thought she was unknown to the group. The editor would not hear of not using the bit of information the gang vetoed as he said it was the juiciest part of the whole story. It was about gang connections with Malindi at the coast where many in Kenya were settled. When her phone rang and the Leader called her by her three names, she knew she was in trouble. She was threatened. The Leader now called the office, the editors shivered with fear. The Leader insisted on speaking to her and he called the landline that had a strange tone. He spoke to her for only half a minute. He warned her to always do as the gang told her otherwise the consequences would be dire. He hang up. In a week, she was transferred to an un-named region in the country. Many young men were killed by police and were said to be members of the gang.

Rika was not afraid of the gang. She was afraid of powerful persons who protected militias. Mystery and power were etched in every stone used to construct media houses. Reporters vowed to keep off gang stories. Mystery and power were etched in every home. Family ties were broken in silence. Mystery and world powers etched themselves in local Parliament and government. This to some was an invitation to more power. Mystery and power stood etched in the churches' columns and

conerstones. There was a big fall out there- worship of Gold was adored over other forms of spirituality. Churches tumbled and fell stone after stone. It was clear that they were dust. It was not just humans who were to remember according to the Lenten call that they are dust, and to dust not only humans were to return. It seemed the like the end of everything.

Song of the cells

Bang! Bang! Bang! DDDDDrrrrrbang! Uniformed cops banged on the door of a local casino in Kirinyaga Crescent. It is 10.30am. The sun has been up for some hours, and it is hot. They hit the door with the butts of their guns. When the door opens four policemen run in as if to raid and suddenly, they stand at attention and salute stiffening their bodies for minutes. It is Bull Scona who is in there. He was the man who managed the Greater Casino up on the hill. He was in charge of the little casinos in more than one way. He had just come back from Malindi.

He spoke with an Italian accent to amused and smiling cops. They knew what he was saying without understanding his words. They dropped their guns and stretched out their palms like beggars. The cops left with their hands in their trouser pockets grinning. 'Peace' reigned like a king as people drunk and killed one another in Kirinyaga, that Saturday. Guns and pistols were sold cheaply in Eastlands of Nairobi that Saturday. People preferred interest free banking and money changed hands 24/7. People from expensive suburbs afraid to step in the east, waited for their deals in posh city hotels. The police were happy with a good day's job. That night a big group of soldiers left for UN peacekeeping missions in different countries of the world.

Rika could not have chosen a better morning to be in Kirinyaga with Rajua. But Rajua was in great fear. She was researching so that she

conerstones. There was a big fall out there- worship of Gold was adored over other forms of spirituality. Churches tumbled and fell stone after stone. It was clear that they were dust. It was not just humans who were to remember according to the Lenten call that they are dust, and to dust not only humans were to return. It seemed the like the end of everything.

Song of the cells

Bang! Bang! Bang! DDDDDrrrrrbang! Uniformed cops banged on the door of a local casino in Kirinyaga Crescent. It is 10.30am. The sun has been up for some hours, and it is hot. They hit the door with the butts of their guns. When the door opens four policemen run in as if to raid and suddenly, they stand at attention and salute stiffening their bodies for minutes. It is Bull Scona who is in there. He was the man who managed the Greater Casino up on the hill. He was in charge of the little casinos in more than one way. He had just come back from Malindi.

He spoke with an Italian accent to amused and smiling cops. They knew what he was saying without understanding his words. They dropped their guns and stretched out their palms like beggars. The cops left with their hands in their trouser pockets grinning. 'Peace' reigned like a king as people drunk and killed one another in Kirinyaga, that Saturday. Guns and pistols were sold cheaply in Eastlands of Nairobi that Saturday. People preferred interest free banking and money changed hands 24/7. People from expensive suburbs afraid to step in the east, waited for their deals in posh city hotels. The police were happy with a good day's job. That night a big group of soldiers left for UN peacekeeping missions in different countries of the world.

Rika could not have chosen a better morning to be in Kirinyaga with Rajua. But Rajua was in great fear. She was researching so that she

could write a story on drug abuse. Rajua, a reformed drug addict accompanies her. When he sees police he begins to cringe and shiver.

"They kill easy," he kept on saying. "They –shoot- to -kill!" The man was paranoid. He had to have a 'quik-quik' drink to continue functioning. Rajua kept telling her not to betray him. Rajua had lived in Malindi where he had taken drugs and slept on trees and in caves. He said he was also very afraid of Italians. He knew Malindi, the Little Milan or Italia of Kenya, the place of *Salumi, formaggi and Vini-APERTO* that many in Europe had no idea about. Rajua spoke and read Italian and German. Italian papers carried many articles about Somali pirates in the high seas of the East African Coast. He knew *raggaze volevano- Girls wanted*. He thought 'sesso', 'bisogno', 'cazzo' sounded so like Kiswahili. He knew, unlike most pious Kenyans, that the Vatican was not Italy. He said since he recovered from drugs he would always remember that people go to places for something and one is lucky to meet those who are not looking to destroy. Even still he was afraid of all missionaries. He repeated the saying, 'British went to Malindi as tourists, German pensioners for women and a life of abandon and the Italians for everything' as if it was part of a rosary prayer.

Rajua kept saying he knew what it was like to become a thing. When he was a prostitute in Malindi he said he had seen everything a man could ever see happen to his body.

"I tell you. I saw my body as if I was outside of it for a long, long time! And my Mother kept sending me messages to take her sugar to stir into her tea in Kijabe!" They said I was a prosperous man!"

Rajua said he was now afraid of everyone in Kenya. He said he was never going to trust anyone in Nairobi anymore. He could not be sure now, even of Rika, he insisted.

It was a Saturday morning. "No one likes getting arrested for sure, but getting arrested on a Saturday or Friday is foolish, it was too much!" He said. "That means being *in* all weekend since the law which forbade being held in a cell no-longer than 24 hour law would not apply!" It

would be a clean 48 hours in those cells. Rika whistled remembering the stinking cells. In the cells, an entire weekend turned into one long sitting on a full up toilet.

It is the cells and courts that should have first changed to embrace the 24/7 hour service before the supermarkets did, thought Rika. But it was not so. There are those who only understood the economy to mean opening up more markets and making more money. Rika whistled again. Those who thought so, expected the economy to grow on injustice. The economy kept showing that it needed security to flourish. Security would give birth to stability.

Many policemen opened businesses in public transport. They owned small retail shops which they were in charge of. They inspected their own shops for contraband goods. The 'Exhibitions' as they were called were little stalls. They were the opposite of the large and beautiful malls that came up every now and then in the better parts of the city. In some of these new malls, you would think you were in Europe or America. Some were even more advanced. They were perfect places for expatriates who blossomed in the land without winter.

The land where a cheap currency made them millionaires fast since they were paid in strong currencies. Police worked night and day to keep these big malls safe for these centres too were under threats from different gangs. The problem of who the police were working for reared its head early. Were all of them working for the law of the country or that of the militias which included extortion of money for protection? Once again, the snake dance was vivid. Both snakes glittered and shone so much, the Biblical golden calf was nothing in comparison. But even then, one editor always said, 'let the poor cops eat, they are only get dry bones. The meat is gone with the politicians. What do you expect soldiers to do?'

Going back to cell life, Rajua went on. "Worse still, if the police chose to, they could still hold you as long as they wished during the week, especially if you had no money!" He said. "The poor have no

justice. The rich can even afford to buy judges and bribe a large part of Parliament,” he added.

Rika reflected on this. ‘Justice’ was bought. ‘Justice’ depended on how much money one had. Who was not going to be caught up in this mess? She wondered.

“Do not betray me. Don’t let them see you can see what they are doing,” Rajua whispered in a low shrill to Rika. He had pleaded in a low voice as he tried to pretend he did not notice the police entering and leaving Kirinyaga Casino.

“No, I will not.”

“Yes, do not show them that you know they have money,” he insisted.

Rika understood his fear.

Half a year ago, Rika had been arrested one night, along with many women who were said to be prostitutes. It had happened in an instant. Her colleagues went to take a quick snack upstairs and left her talking to Wairi, a young and new girl she had met in the red -light district where Rika knew her way well. Police shot out from under the tables like an attack of thrush in the mouth and arrested her hurrying her down the stairs and out. Rika pleaded with one policeman saying that she was a journalist but he told her she would be accused of pimping if she kept on talking. The cop who accompanied him was silent. She feared he did not look like a typical policeman in spite of his uniform. Many people had used police uniforms to commit crime. She spoke loudly. They told her to shut up. They had told her journalists were terrible because they not only told lies but wrote and broadcast them. She remembered what an uncomfortable silence filled the air of the restaurant as she was hurried past. In the cells, before she was released by a team of journalists, a human rights lawyer and friends who got bail signed for her by night, she met Mwangaza a well known night worker.

Mwangaza had spent a week in the cells because the man who spoke English in an unusual way in Nairobi accused her of stealing his

very expensive phone. The man said his name was Idemili -Maina - Kanuri -Yoruba. Some said he spoke with a Nigerian Idemili man accent but who knew what was a pure accent? Of that nobody could be sure. What was certain is that he accused Mwangaza in his own way and the police arrested her. He bribed the policemen with all the money they sweetly demanded. He transferred money to police using his other new and more expensive phone in which he only used voice in command form. It was said his fingers could not bend now for he had cosmetic surgery to insert silver in them so that they would never rot when he was buried. Police could not get his fingerprints. He too, was decked with silver and gold. He even had fine gold wedges in the heels of his shoes. His watch was ringed with diamonds.

Again in the cells, Rika had heard hopeless women saying that in the past in the courts they pleaded guilty to every accusation. If the charge sheet read they were drunk and disorderly even if they were as sober as some say judges are supposed to be; they agreed because it meant they could pay a fine of five dollars or clean the police toilets, finish their sentence and leave.

For the men it was different. Idemili-Maina-Kanuri-Yoruba paid millions for bond and the law courts accepted his money in cash. As for the local young men, when they were accused of belonging to a proscribed group, they immediately denied the charges like him. They were released almost always on high cash bails too. They paid their sum on the spot while other people who were charged with lesser crimes and who also denied the charges, run back and forth looking for property titles to deposit for their own release.

Balancing lines

Rika is sitting at her desk, in the newsroom. It is calm in the early morning but she knows this will soon change. Rika can sit back and

very expensive phone. The man said his name was Idemili -Maina - Kanuri -Yoruba. Some said he spoke with a Nigerian Idemili man accent but who knew what was a pure accent? Of that nobody could be sure. What was certain is that he accused Mwangaza in his own way and the police arrested her. He bribed the policemen with all the money they sweetly demanded. He transferred money to police using his other new and more expensive phone in which he only used voice in command form. It was said his fingers could not bend now for he had cosmetic surgery to insert silver in them so that they would never rot when he was buried. Police could not get his fingerprints. He too, was decked with silver and gold. He even had fine gold wedges in the heels of his shoes. His watch was ringed with diamonds.

Again in the cells, Rika had heard hopeless women saying that in the past in the courts they pleaded guilty to every accusation. If the charge sheet read they were drunk and disorderly even if they were as sober as some say judges are supposed to be; they agreed because it meant they could pay a fine of five dollars or clean the police toilets, finish their sentence and leave.

For the men it was different. Idemili-Maina-Kanuri-Yoruba paid millions for bond and the law courts accepted his money in cash. As for the local young men, when they were accused of belonging to a proscribed group, they immediately denied the charges like him. They were released almost always on high cash bails too. They paid their sum on the spot while other people who were charged with lesser crimes and who also denied the charges, run back and forth looking for property titles to deposit for their own release.

Balancing lines

Rika is sitting at her desk, in the newsroom. It is calm in the early morning but she knows this will soon change. Rika can sit back and

think for a while. Soon, phone calls will jam the lines and work will become intense. She used to remember that in rivers which one does not know well and in newsrooms- which journalists thought they knew well- depths changed unpredictably. One had to learn how to flow around rocks in newsmaking. Some rocks took lots of water passing over them before attrition could remove their danger. It was back in her school days that she had learned the lesson that to swim in a river one does not do their best swimming stroke. One invents something to go a long. A new stroke between dog's paddle and what she would call 'fish wriggly' worked to swim in a river. As a teenager Rika learned that in rivers, there were stones swimming too and rocks jutting off the edges. These did not move for you if you went their way. If stones under dark water drift towards you, you do not see them and move away. Her brothers knew this long before. They swam in the local village rivers before they were ten. She did not.

Rika had hit a stone underneath the water as they swam in a broad part of the river which Lulu's Mum had said was safest to swim in. Rika only told the others of her 'adventure' once they were out of the cool river 'pool'. Lulu's father was a politician and farmer. The Girl Guides had a great time out there. Lord Robert Baden- Powell, Lieutenant General, of the Scouts Movement still had influence from six feet under, where he was buried. When he was alive, he taught that the environment could be used to mold young people into responsible citizens. Rika thought how disappointed Powell would be these days to see what was happening in Nanyuki, some 147.06 Km from Nairobi and where the Kenya railway lines end having stalled there for a century. The training of British soldiers in Nanyuki, North West of Mt. Kenya would make Powell arise and march past his own grave. Hills burst into fire in Nanyuki, as soldiers trained for Afghanistan whose desert terrain was said to look very like that part of Kenya. Kenyan soldiers are also cultivated in the same desert. Girls, women, boys, men, lions, elephants and leopards have tense nights in Nanyuki. Powell lies buried deep

beneath the destruction that breathes underneath north of Nyeri in Central Kenya.

Rika learned to be at different levels like water and like music at work and at home, all through her life. Playing at the back of her mind now, was that anniversary ad she had spotted in The Sabat News. Kitale schooldays came rushing back to her mind when she saw it. Lulu was her best friend in class. Lulu's late husband's anniversary was in one of the many pages that were filled with death and funeral announcements. In the newspapers photos and many details including how many grandchildren and great grandchildren old people who died had were part of the announcements. Death could not be pronounced without life. Death and anniversary announcements captioned with a consoling verse here and there were important here. This day they filled four pages.

The same announcements would be relayed on radios for the Kenyans who did not read. Many Kenyans could only afford the radio and they bought airtime. Some local radios read death and funeral announcements for almost two hours daily. In the villages that time was treated like a holy and silent hour. Radios- especially before the arrival of the mobile phone on which such news was easily texted- would be listened to in utter silence. People listened just in case the bad news concerning a relative or a friend had escaped them. The two hours were more silent than a graveyard.

"Please Katere, could you get me this Kitale number," Rika asks.

She was finding it impossible to get the call through and she knew the Telephone Operator knew a trick or two. She passes a piece of paper to him, cup of coffee in one hand and moves back to her desk. For this call, she would not use the little credit left on her mobile phone after last night's calls. Rika like all the staff was allowed to make personal calls and she had two landlines on each side of her desk. Her mobile phone was on the table in front of her computer. The telephone with the squeaky sound, the one that was called often for complaints was also near her but behind her desk.

A buzz on her left alerted her that Katere had put her call through.

"Hi Lulu! This is Rika Bukenya. Remember me?"

"Oh! Hi Rika! With all your by-lines in the papers who can forget your name? I am so glad to hear from you! How are you?"

"Errr.. Am.. Am fine! I read about Ralph Burke's anniversary and I am calling to let you know I noticed it and that am with you, my sister, as you commemorate him!"

"Thanks Rika, that is so kind of you! Well, look at our lives! Remember how we used to read about these things in books. Journalists investigating, widows, deaths and so on... look at our lives!" Lulu was as cheerful as she always was in school.

"Yes, I remember too how we never heard or read about corruption. We read about smugglers. Remember *Smugglers Inn* one of The famous Five?"

"Of course I do. Our times were too good to be forgotten!"

"Oh, well, yes we did hear about *Magendo*. We ought to be doing better? It has been a long time that we only point at social evils and do nothing to change things!"

"Hhmm! You are right! I think we leave it too much in politicians' hands and they are not in a hurry to change things..."

Just as well Rika was gifted with a nimble mind. The memorable Kitale School days rushed in; sweeping out fears and pains. She felt fresh again, as if she was truly back in those days swimming away. Those carefree days! Those days that she, and other scouts, went camping at Lulu's farm and swam in the river that run through it were her best Kitale days. That was the first time that she and some of the other girls swam in a river. Rika had learnt how to swim in a pool at school with a proper coach. Mrs Naylor was an Irish volunteer for Loreto Schools.

"Lulu, I would have loved to be with you, but I can't make it. I will keep you in mind. You know how I love traveling to Kitale but there is all this work I have to finish. I just don't believe how time flies!"

“Not to worry. You know, I have started a small flower shop on Koinange Street. It is very near the City Market. I fly to Nairobi every fortnight and stay there for at least four days!”

“Lunch on me one of these days! You know...it’s always fun meeting former school friends and past Loretos are special!”

“I will call again soon. Please allow me, my other landline is ringing!”

“Sure! And thanks very much!” Lulu shouted. “I understand! Big hug!”

The peculiar landline phone made its strange sound and rang loudly and briefly as if to cut off. Rika picked it up quickly. This was the phone behind her. She knew that the phone on her right side had also rang and stopped in the meantime. This was typical of day Tuesdays. Business here woke up on Tuesdays and was at its peak on Fridays. She picked up the phone that sounded like a squeaky war cry. The one on which the Big Man called sometimes.

“Hello.... yes, thank you. Oh, not again! Another girl’s body dumped on the hills.... Ngong Hills?”

“Yes, she too was picked up by the same men, police say,” said the familiar voice of Patrik, a Human Rights activist who called her often.

“Which men? The gang, or the ones who drive big cars to pick girls off Koinange Street?” Rika asked emphasizing each word.

“Not clear yet.”

“Any leads?”

“Yes. The body is mutilated and the cash she was paid for ‘her services’ was left on her tattooed butts. She had fine golden chains and diamonds stuck into her....hm! her.. “

Rika could tell that he was crying.

“*Pole sana! Pole Patrik!* OK. Try and hold yourself together. I will be there soon!”

“Rika. No. Rika. It is too much for me. I had to look aside. I was there with Su. She and Ann helped the police with the body. They were

very afraid that the chains and diamonds, good exhibits would be stolen by the cops. They were not allowed to touch her much but they took many photographs of her.”

Rika was worried about the police she would have to interview for this case, but she had to talk with some of them.

Everything had turned illusive and fearful. Reality was becoming incomprehensible; indeed impenetrable. Many repeated Achebe's title, *Things Fall Apart*. Nothing seemed to be what it really was. Dimensions rose and fell in different angles. Things were hard and tension high. There were many things on Rika's mind.

Well, she had to move fast on this one. Ready, she thought, just as she took a last sip from her cup of coffee. The anxieties about the gang rose in her like a new wave. This was poignant, she could not set it aside. She could not afford to lose focus even for a moment. It was urgent. A MEMO from the main office warning that no investigative stories were to be done on the gang flew to her desk. It was stamped URGENT in red. The MEMO did not say that the government was afraid of these stories. It did not say that the rich people behind the safety of electronic fences at home were more afraid of the gangs than the government in which they were largely represented. Rika remembered the many middle class people who told her they no longer watched news. Most of their companies had stopped placing advertisements on TV. These were the viewers who protested to media houses to stop showing and writing about things that depressed them.

All this hit Rika hard. Another mutilated body in the bush and people do not want to know. Her conscience was disturbed. Was she doing enough? She continued to ask herself many questions. She was arrested by her own thoughts. She knew that hard news reporters had left for Ngong' already. She tried to peer through the darkness of the 'night' before her. It was the darkest time of the night, of which traditional proverbs both in Africa and other lands, said was closest to dawn. She would not stop.

Recalling the history of how the Sabasaba Defence Force was an offshoot of a well meaning group, Rika felt really sad. It had penetrated all structures, this gang. If only it had lived to its promise of giving support to the people. But it had not. Confusion reigned. Senior police persons were unable to deal with it and many of their seniors were murdered by the gangs. No doubt was left of the possibility of the militia gangs being stronger than the police. Was this the final collapse? Recalling the dance of the two snakes, she sank into deeper thoughts.

And still the harder part of her work that day was not done. She went into the morgue bravely and examined the body which was found on Ngong Hills. Yes, she had fresh wounds all over. Yes, she had *had* a very rough time. She saw the so-called tattoos were wounds on the girl's behind. She was still bleeding from her private parts. She saw many injuries and bruises. She asked the attendant standing by her to turn the body so that she could see her hair. Her hair had been pulled off near the nape of the neck but it was still held up in a loosened bun. Rika's eyes opened a little wider. She saw the little angel's tired face. Yes, she was young and beautiful and angry. Rika was frozen in a second. Here lay little Deni in the last of her pain. That night Rika could not sleep. She rang the office and took a day off.

By the rivers of pain

"These men, they are different. One picked me up twice and beat me up both times after he paid me. Another picked me up and told me he would never forget me and that one day, he would help me leave the streets. But that was after he called me up to clean his flat twice. I never saw him again. He forbade me to make his bed the last time I was there, because, he said, I was not his wife!" Mwangaza told Rika one night. She went on to speak about the Arabic man.

Recalling the history of how the Sabasaba Defence Force was an offshoot of a well meaning group, Rika felt really sad. It had penetrated all structures, this gang. If only it had lived to its promise of giving support to the people. But it had not. Confusion reigned. Senior police persons were unable to deal with it and many of their seniors were murdered by the gangs. No doubt was left of the possibility of the militia gangs being stronger than the police. Was this the final collapse? Recalling the dance of the two snakes, she sank into deeper thoughts.

And still the harder part of her work that day was not done. She went into the morgue bravely and examined the body which was found on Ngong Hills. Yes, she had fresh wounds all over. Yes, she had *had* a very rough time. She saw the so-called tattoos were wounds on the girl's behind. She was still bleeding from her private parts. She saw many injuries and bruises. She asked the attendant standing by her to turn the body so that she could see her hair. Her hair had been pulled off near the nape of the neck but it was still held up in a loosened bun. Rika's eyes opened a little wider. She saw the little angel's tired face. Yes, she was young and beautiful and angry. Rika was frozen in a second. Here lay little Deni in the last of her pain. That night Rika could not sleep. She rang the office and took a day off.

By the rivers of pain

"These men, they are different. One picked me up twice and beat me up both times after he paid me. Another picked me up and told me he would never forget me and that one day, he would help me leave the streets. But that was after he called me up to clean his flat twice. I never saw him again. He forbade me to make his bed the last time I was there, because, he said, I was not his wife!" Mwangaza told Rika one night. She went on to speak about the Arabic man.

“You know am not of your class, woman, do you? I am up here and you are down there. You are my slave tonight and all women are my slaves. They touch me only when I want, where I wanted, how I wanted, as long as I wanted it. I pay for that. To be touched,” Said the man. Rika had heard many times that he used to parade women and abuse them calling them Bantus.

So, it was clear. Men saw and sometimes paid the object that they chose to touch them. And if this un-spoken contract was broken - they were masters being served by slaves at the slaves' own risk- they could kill them. One minute they were happy in bed and the next, they were roughing the girls up, torturing them, deriding them, sliding a knife in their warm blood, laughing, Rika thought.

But those desperate girls she knew on the streets had determination. Rika would think of the donkeys she had seen in her home area; and that line of the donkey's triumph from G.K. Chesterton's *The donkey*, always came to her mind: *“Starve, scourge, deride me, I am dumb, I keep my secret still.”*

How different were the lives of these women from the lives of employees working in a money first, capitalist system? Just like many poor workers they had no contracts; and when they had them, these did not make any difference at all. A whole nation abused.

Oppressive environments claim equality on paper but in reality they only know objects. Both the oppressor and the oppressed are objectified. Even those who think they are rich turn into objects. The tragedy of turning into objects was as effective as in Midas's touch. Many women were made into objects. This was terrible as it led to women making children and even the seeds that should grow as food on the land, hard objects. When you come to it, you will remember forever, the story of the boy who went to a shop to see a woman whose face he felt compelled to look at for a long time. He never knew why he had to worship that face every so often.

That night in the cells, Mwangaza had looked down angrily and said to Rika, "These animals are too busy dumping on us bundles of irresponsibility, not joy!" Mwangaza sighed like a charging bull. Suddenly, she laughed out loud and long. She told Rika how casually she and her friends threw dead, partly alive and live babies out in plastic bags into the garbage. "We throw them far out, Ku! Ku! Ku! We call them *nyuguta*!" She cried.

It was true Rika knew this. 'Fling' was the meaning of *nyuguta* which referred not so much to an affair but to throwing out a heavy item! Rika had followed up many dumped baby stories.

Good Samaritans including street boys found some of these babies, called for help and, forgetting their own plight, rescued them. Stray dogs ate some. But one dog made history. It saved a baby from death carrying it by biting the towel wrapping the baby in its mouth, protecting it and snarling at all who came close. It made headline news. If its dignity had survived this far, what were its ancestors like? Rika was reminded of Remus and Romulus, the myth of the twins who founded Rome after being rescued by a she-wolf. Dogs of Honour Family, might this Nairobi dog's ancestors have been called? The dog was visited by many people. Some began to say it was an angel in disguise.

Times were hard. Many hid in ever increasing churches where the message of hope grew on them like a balloon shooting up to the stars. Many started their own churches to suit themselves. Would somebody start the Dog of Honour church somewhere? Rika expected anything now. Churches sprung up in places as fast as an e-mail is sent. Church founders were people with their pulse on the desperation of the nation. Churches such as these 'ate' the poor. These churches had sponsors in America.

At Uhuru Park on Sunday morning loudspeakers boom. "Those who have clean one thousand notes, please come forward. The ones who have small money.. coins, please sit down. Come up last. It is time

for tithing. You shall be healed and oiled, anointed accordingly! No more Aids, no more!” Shouted pastor Yaya in his roaring American accent.

The prayer meeting was stopped by petrol bombs made in Russia. People died. A little boy died. A new constitution was coming. The 1998 August bombing of the American Embassy in Nairobi killed 257 in Kenya (12 Americans) and injured 4 836 Kenyans was hardly commemorated because a new Kenyan constitution was on the way. A super coordinated attack, the blasts in Dar es salaam went off minutes after Nairobi, killing 11 and injuring 86 Tanzanians. Kenyan victims who lost limbs, sight and hearing were tossed between Al Qaeda and America for compensation. America spent money faster in retaliation hitting Sudan and Afghanistan.

In the homes as some drunk thin milky tea before going to sleep that evening, cups dropped. “Brrruu. Pu. Pu . pu puuuuppppp!” The sound of bullets rang. It was a policeman’s wife. He had seen her looking at his colleague who was undressing in the next room.

“Puuup! Pup! Pup! Pup... puuuuup!” rang bullets in the smart suburbs.

A rich woman shoots the judge she married two years ago. She had just found out that at 45, he had an 18 year-old sweetheart who had a new baby last week. “These were not the days of polygamy!” She shouted before opening fire.

People visiting from Europe and traveling by road were appalled by the many signs of Church G, Church B, Church C and even Church X. They said all these things had not been seen in their countries. Kenyans kept changing from one church to the other every so many months; they were looking, they said for the living ministry. They could not find it even mainstream churches that had the experience of having seen many countries grow.

In the homes, teenagers decorated their rooms with Michael Jackson, Obama, Whitney Houston, Oprah and Fifty Cent in the way

in which a person hanging off a cliff would grab the nearest stone with a sharp edge even if it was clear they could not manage to cling for long. Che, Mandela and Biko posters were also found here and there.

Somehow, it always seemed to these youth, that someone from out there could do a better job at rescuing them, redeeming them, saving them. They were oriented to believe that home heroes: Kimathi, J.M Kariuki, Pio Gama Pinto, Me Katilili and Nyanjiru and others were not their hope. Many of them did not see the connection with history and what they felt they needed today, what they tried to claim as theirs in their restlessness. Their memories were not irrigated with the pain of the past from which sprang their present sufferings. Most of the ones Rika knew got saved in a mysterious way, they said, by Christ. They also sang Bob Marley's tunes but feared his leaf or *ganja* as they called it.

The saved ones were not happy when Rika filled The Sabat News with stories about women they called prostitutes. Magdalena, a young girl, was worried about Rika, she kept inviting her to conversion on specific dates. She told her that the world was going to end one of those typical hot January months when people in Kenya did not have money for school fees having spent all they had on Christmas and New Year. Rika felt she had touched the underbelly of souls and states; and how they interconnect also with religions.

Rika knew that more and more people in Nairobi and in the countryside belonged to small circles of friends and neighbours; *chama*, women's groups and savings clubs in better off communities. Youth groups were harder to find. The most desperate youth shunned mainstream religion and made a clarion call for a return to their roots. They said they were searching for freedom. Some of them bounced as they sang saying, Afrika unite! These said foreign interests were holding Kenya at ransom and that Kenyan youth had to reject the West.

Politicians run to these young people quickly for fear of the resistance they saw coming their way. Politicians needed roots with or

without leaves or trunks; they took anything that could keep them in power. If they could thrust one root in China, the other in America and the last one in Russia, what mattered was that they had money. The young men formed more gangs to threaten political power more. The gangs multiplied like the poor in churches. They increased how they had done in Colombia, and other countries in South America. Those who saw all these ramifications clearly bit their lower lip with anxiety. In their heads the dance of the two snake became more vigorous.

In the evenings many wealthier Kenyans thinking they were safe behind huge iron gates and watchmen that slept by their doors were tucked away in their living room couches or in bed lost in *La Mujer de mi vida*, a soap opera on all the TV screens. Others had beat the traffic jam earlier to be in time for *The Rich also Cry* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

The young rural people seemed to insist on making some of their own local heroes. They wanted their Leader to be rich too. Sometimes it was clear they only needed heroes who had money. But there was a difference. They, unlike the wealthy Kenyans, seemed to look for heroes who could lead them in their own mother tongues. Certainly, it was clear they needed their own songs. They never sang in languages that were not their mother tongues. They packed their secrets in songs using nuances and metaphors that beat even good speakers of the languages they used in subtlety. They began to look for the Sabasaba Defence Force to become stronger.

Nairobi

She had just finished her story about the trials of the street girls in which the story of Deni was central. No mention of men and gangs was possible. Just then her mobile phone began to light up and blink. She had been trying to reach a policeman she knew on the landline in vain.

without leaves or trunks; they took anything that could keep them in power. If they could thrust one root in China, the other in America and the last one in Russia, what mattered was that they had money. The young men formed more gangs to threaten political power more. The gangs multiplied like the poor in churches. They increased how they had done in Colombia, and other countries in South America. Those who saw all these ramifications clearly bit their lower lip with anxiety. In their heads the dance of the two snake became more vigorous.

In the evenings many wealthier Kenyans thinking they were safe behind huge iron gates and watchmen that slept by their doors were tucked away in their living room couches or in bed lost in *La Mujer de mi vida*, a soap opera on all the TV screens. Others had beat the traffic jam earlier to be in time for *The Rich also Cry* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

The young rural people seemed to insist on making some of their own local heroes. They wanted their Leader to be rich too. Sometimes it was clear they only needed heroes who had money. But there was a difference. They, unlike the wealthy Kenyans, seemed to look for heroes who could lead them in their own mother tongues. Certainly, it was clear they needed their own songs. They never sang in languages that were not their mother tongues. They packed their secrets in songs using nuances and metaphors that beat even good speakers of the languages they used in subtlety. They began to look for the Sabasaba Defence Force to become stronger.

Nairobi

She had just finished her story about the trials of the street girls in which the story of Deni was central. No mention of men and gangs was possible. Just then her mobile phone began to light up and blink. She had been trying to reach a policeman she knew on the landline in vain.

Rika put down the landline receiver and picked up her mobile phone.

“Hello! Is that Rika Bukenya?”

“Yes, it is?”

“This is Rei Burke. I am calling from Geneva.”

“Hello, Rei! Emile wrote to me about you. How are the plans coming on?”

“In a couple of days I will be in Nairobi.”

“I still don’t know exactly how I can help but you are most welcome!”

“I will need much help but if you don’t mind, let’s discuss this as soon as I arrive. Is that OK?”

“Perfect. I am due for a few days off anyway and I can make sometime for you as Emile had hinted.”

“Wonderful! How is the weather?”

“Still winter for us, warm spring for you. No rain.”

“Great. I know Nairobi can be chilly in the mornings at this time. All the best now, I know you are busy.”

“Right. See you then.”

In her light khaki journalist’s jacket over a tight pale green shirt and black trousers, no one could guess that Rika was a mother of two children. She did not care for ethnic groups and their traditions and she named her children herself. Following neither tribe nor custom she gave her children names with meanings that pleased all. Her children looked just like her. Uhai meaning life or living was her first child and Hariri, beauty, her second. Life and Beauty. She repeated them often. Uhai and Hariri. She loved her children.

Another cup of coffee sat in Rika’s left palm as the right cuddled the little smooth china handle. Rika felt a little more refreshed when she put it down. She envisioned the interior of Lulu’s flower shop on Koinange Street as she let the coffee take on more effect. She felt the heat relax all her body.

Koinange Street is about 800 meters long. It has The University of Nairobi Campus for its head if you prefer, facing Gandhi Wing; and the Catholic Holy Family Minor Basilica the equivalent of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome here, for its feet. It stands as if in a group hug with Moi Avenue, Uhuru Highway and Kenyatta Avenue. Lower down, Koinange shakes hands with Kenyatta Avenue, traversing the avenue as it goes towards the Minor Basilica. In the colonial past, Koinange Street was known as Sadler Street. It linked up with The Royal Kingsway now University Way. Moi Avenue, was formerly Government Road.

There on Koinange Street, still stands, so silent and clean, an ice cream shop. It is almost unaffected by the passing of years unlike snow on Mount Kenya. The ice cream increases, the snow diminishes, she thought. The little shop with its old ice cream drawings on the wall introduced ice cream to many village boys and girls who came to Nairobi for the first time to go to university. They would go and buy ice cream and lick it away with fascination in the hot weather as they walked up and down Uhuru Park. They felt the power of living in the only city in the country then, known to the world as the 'green city in the sun'.

Above the ice cream shop, a spacious restaurant catches the eye of many with its name typically written in red in an eastern alphabet. It is the place where constantly smart businessmen gently trickle in. They are mainly clean and lean but among them fat ones wobble in too with the gout toe still protesting having to work.

Rika knew the story of a poet who gently begged for a corner in this restaurant. He was persistently there with a kind and innocent smile. He got space to read poems to the patrons. They thought he was a crooner able to soothe them to sleep with sweet words until they woke up to the 'bulletwords' he unleashed making the entire city dance to the pulse of his beat. The spacious restaurant was crammed with wanderers who cheered the poet wildly. They screamed each time he bounced on his toes and spoke with his finger hacking the air, like a rap musician as his dreadlocks moved up and down in the air. "*So what?*" he asked, "

So what if am a poetic warrior, did you not know of Muyaka bin Muyaka?" and he laughed.

The people ate his naked words but the patrons began to lose weight. When some some fat bellies began to disappear and restlessness began to invade this happy class, the poet was asked to leave the premises and do his performances on the streets. He went to Market Street where the people always followed him. There were always intelligence police trying to assess how dangerous he could be. This police seemed to have no understanding of how gangs in Nairobi. They tried to look for gangs in the poets hair.

The name, Koinange Street was symbolic to Rika for she had found out it literally meant the broken little one; and yet, in history, it was not the name of a weak person. It was a name associated with political power. But the poor girls on the streets were little and broken like the sharp ends of bottles that fell after a beer bottle was smashed forcefully against a wall. They were broken also even when they were alive, like the shards of a whiskey bottle and glasses that are collected after the two fall and break or are hit against one another.

When she thought of it, Koinange Street, Nairobi's famous red - light district was interesting. Perhaps all red -light districts are. By day, Koinange Street is a serious business hub with up-market traders going in and out of shops. Why did she feel that everyone there and elsewhere owed Deni something?

Koinange Street is kissed by important places and people. At the bottom of the street near the Holy Family Minor Basilica is the General Post office simply called Posta. It is true that from there Kaunda Street takes the burden off Koinange Street shoulders but all this area remains part of Nairobi's red -light district.

Off Parliament Road which takes over, The Inter Continental Hotel sits opposite the Minor Basilica on the same side as The Mausoleum which is guarded twenty four hours. Kenyatta's stiff and dry remains lie there, presumably surrounded by precious stones. Kenyatta lies

sunken in the ground across the road from the Basilica. It was a fact some old men could not believe this even after years. It is as if they thought Kenyatta never died. Rika would wonder at them and Kenyatta. Does Kenyatta see Koinange Street or Uhuru Park from there? Did he see a live Freedom Corner on that morning women stripped naked? Did he still face Mount Kenya? The old men wondered at the silence of death even in the bones of an emperor.

Kenyatta had given Kenya Harambee for education, food, shelter, health and clothing. Parliament Buildings along Parliament Road were almost an extension of Kenyatta's Mausoleum. Beyond there was Harambee Avenue. *Harambee* is a word Kenyatta popularised as a call to Kenyans to rally together for the growth of the country. He is said to have seen railway workers chanting it as they worked together. It was adulterated. It came to mean monetary power. It remains Kenya's official motto and on the legs of feet players it works well. Perhaps its beauty will be returned by Ambee Mata the tiger who comes riding on Durga when Kenyans decide to look to the east without fear. Kenyans hid Hindu and Indian influence in railway lines. Life in East Africa run parallel to Asia in the east. The Donovan Maule Theatre that used to be a neighbour of County Hall in the past did not help exorcise fears. The plays that showed there for years favored both in actors, content and audience the elite population of Nairobi who pulled alone in one direction.

Rika knew these places well. On Koinange Street many international press conferences were held in Chester House, the home of many news agencies. Cross Market Street near the City Market facing L Grand Regency Hotel, at the T junction and one of the oldest and lively spots in Nairobi hides in there just after the fuel station. On Google Maps the spot stands up un-abashed in a red drop. It is an old nightclub, a witness to plenty of news- in- the- making. It was open all night long when no media house or supermarket worked 24/7.

Rika knows that these days, an enthusiastic Tish Patel in jeans, eats poems with others in a restaurant near that club, giving Koinange a different hidden life. It does not cross Tish's mind what a revolutionary event that is. In all parts of Nairobi, Rika knows that poets have begun to walk on the streets becoming the griots of anti-corruption. Small voices at first, a loud sound in the end.

Rika was there one eventful night when a group of women creative writers gave poems on postcards to all the prostitutes they met on that street after 9pm. King Wa the leader of the project was so excited to see the girls smile and put the post cards in their little purses. They said nobody except the police and their male clients had ever wanted to go near them. They were outcasts living in a own world they feared for its sudden changes and insecurity. On the postcards the artists gave out was an address for counseling and legal assistance.

Maya and her Mother were now running a management Agency for University students. They taught the girls how to fund raise for their fees. Some of the girls at the University of Nairobi first joked about getting a degree in street life and then ended up in the cars of the men who picked up girls on Koinange Street. Sometimes, they told some of their clients to go to their rooms or pick them outside their halls of residence where they lived. They paid fees. The Agency bosses said that girls said they needed money to study and some men had enough to go round and that is how economics worked. Some people, even poor parents were pleased at this success, they said these girls knew how to use their brain and brawn. This was a city and every city has its ways of as we said in Kiswahili of smashing life, eating life- *kuponda maisha*.

Sometimes cities eat life out of people who think they are enjoy life. Maya and her Mother gave counseling and their lives bloomed. Many men went to them confessing that they had cheated many girls they could support them just so that they would have sex with them daily. Now, they found they could not live up to their word. The girls

were demanding. Their men had to buy them teddy bears and dogs and house them in beautiful and expensive apartments. These girls clung to the class 'their' men belonged to and insisted on staying. By day the men swore by their traditional dignity full of generosity and on the Bible. They said they were only trying to live. But soon, by night, many of them became heavy drinkers who were schizophrenic too. Some lucky girls ended up in rehabilitation centres. Maya and her Mother asked them to pay a good fee for healing, because they had the medicine for their ailment. Not one of them got better. Instead Maya's schizophrenia became big screen drama for her and her mother.

The red -business district was intricate and so much wider than people thought. Rika remembered Nguvu the driver who could find a direct route through the back streets from Mathare slums to K-Street as he called Koinange Street almost with his eyes closed. On this K-street and other places, poor girls in glamour that would outdo Donna's dressing and when necessary Queen Sheba's regalia marched gloriously in clothes bought from previous earnings, borrowed or hired. They zigzagged from poverty and found a way to meet men from the club of the upperworld. Here, is where most people thought they saw most clearly the movements of the two snakes dancing. But they were mistaken. The dance went on everywhere. It is just that here, a few bold people dared come out to the open even if they did not show their faces on camera.

Some of these girls moved on to the suburbs of the wealthy; initially sharing rented guest wing houses. They ended up buying out entire estate houses in Eastlands, and finally houses in the Westlands posh area too.

But a happy ending was not for everyone, many girls died before they even knew the whole city. Yet others were stuck in the streets and gummed down in the slums by disease. They were in a sea of greater moral depravity and material poverty coping with stigmas galore; and yet, here in the slums, they still found laughter in their bones and the

tickle of adventure did not abandon them. This was something that truly fascinated Rika. Good humor is embedded and defended in living proverbs in Africa. This made her think about all humanity. She reflected that it was fascinating that no entire civilization had ever encouraged mass suicide of their own. People fled to safety or killed their enemies in war to preserve themselves. Groups of people not only perpetuated themselves through children but also tried to immortalize their own civilizations and cultures, their beliefs.

Rika saw many times that Kenyans walking, talking, eating and laughing on K-Street come from anywhere. Some had been to church early in the morning, others to Parliament. Some had just been released from hospital after about four weeks in the wards, others had come from other towns, classrooms, hotels and the slums too. The street was Kenya.

No pride for brides

That evening, Rika watched a documentary film titled *In A Dark Time*. She recalled the girl who cried all the time as she watched this film in the slums in a community centre. This was the girl who had her ears sticking outside the cloth that embalmed her face and who sighed and cried all through the film. She came from neighbouring Eastleigh. *In A Dark Time* was about the rape of women for joining opposition politics in Zimbabwe. The girls asked the others who were crying softly too, if they had seen another film: *The darkest afternoon in Dandora*. Her voice quivered as she explained that it was about a 50 year old woman who was gang raped in Dandora along with her pregnant daughter. Her daughter miscarried and died.

How to remain human and keep opposing so much at a personal level and in the community Rika wondered. Was there hope hiding in all this? The girl with the ears sticking out of the cloth that embalmed

tickle of adventure did not abandon them. This was something that truly fascinated Rika. Good humor is embedded and defended in living proverbs in Africa. This made her think about all humanity. She reflected that it was fascinating that no entire civilization had ever encouraged mass suicide of their own. People fled to safety or killed their enemies in war to preserve themselves. Groups of people not only perpetuated themselves through children but also tried to immortalize their own civilizations and cultures, their beliefs.

Rika saw many times that Kenyans walking, talking, eating and laughing on K-Street come from anywhere. Some had been to church early in the morning, others to Parliament. Some had just been released from hospital after about four weeks in the wards, others had come from other towns, classrooms, hotels and the slums too. The street was Kenya.

No pride for brides

That evening, Rika watched a documentary film titled *In A Dark Time*. She recalled the girl who cried all the time as she watched this film in the slums in a community centre. This was the girl who had her ears sticking outside the cloth that embalmed her face and who sighed and cried all through the film. She came from neighbouring Eastleigh. *In A Dark Time* was about the rape of women for joining opposition politics in Zimbabwe. The girls asked the others who were crying softly too, if they had seen another film: *The darkest afternoon in Dandora*. Her voice quivered as she explained that it was about a 50 year old woman who was gang raped in Dandora along with her pregnant daughter. Her daughter miscarried and died.

How to remain human and keep opposing so much at a personal level and in the community Rika wondered. Was there hope hiding in all this? The girl with the ears sticking out of the cloth that embalmed

her face was not crying about something far from her own body. When there was a little pause, she started to speak. She said she could well remember an old woman in her life, whom she only saw once and would never forget. As she spoke, she rubbed the palms of her hands together and gently laid them on her thighs, with the inside of her palms up. She pushed her wrists into her dress covering her thighs with great discomfort as she told them how this woman chopped up her private parts. She cringed as if it were happening all over again.

Suddenly, her little face turned more grim. She went on eloquently, “She sat there. We were thirteen of us held in one room. We had abruptly been stopped from going to school and home had turned into a strange place in which I felt things and heard noises I had never heard before. We were told to sit on the floor of the room we were in. I really wanted to run away but there was no way I could. Our houses were in one big plot in our Eastleigh city home. Someone would catch me before I made it to the gates. Everyone in the neighborhood knew what was going on. They said, the hour, our hour had come to be prepared for marriage! Marriage was to come soon after being cut. You do not know how much I cry when I hear of the woman politician who run away from her rural village when it was time for her to be circumcised. I wish she taught all the girls how to do that!” She fought tears back. How could she get married when she did not even know any boys? In fact boys never got married. She did not even have girlfriends. What she did not know was that an old man would be prepared for her. Secretly, she posted a letter to her cousin in London to rescue her. Her cousin wrote back encouraging her to be calm for she too had been cut in a hidden clinic.

She moved her veil and went on, “I wish it had not come so quietly. I would have looked for someone else to help me. I felt so trapped. I will never trust grown ups who stay up late in the night negotiating things in hushed tones. That is what I had seen in our home. I felt imprisoned. I felt pain. I felt alone. I felt betrayed. When I realized

what was happening, I tried to turn to older women to ask them why but they would not answer me or want to go into details. They promised me pain. I was supposed to promise endurance, unflinching loyalty to a custom. I did not and I will not. My children will never endure that. Look at my finger tips. I will always remember how the selected old woman held her razor blade. She held it like this. She then picked my clitoris and she cut and stopped, cut and stopped, cut and stopped! I prayed to God asking if she had to shred me. Did she want me to die? She wanted me to feel each cut. One of the girls with us did not stop bleeding. She bled profusely for two days and only on the third day did they take her for medical attention. They feared what the doctor would say. She nearly died.” The girl stopped wiping her tears. She let them flow down. Everyone wept silently with her.

After a long time, Rika told them the story of a Borana woman who had gone to London to get ‘cosmetic’ surgery on her private parts after having undergone infibulations as a young girl. “She was in our school. She used to take ten minutes to pee!”

“Infibulation! You not only get everything clipped off but you get sewn up and only a little space remains to let out urine and your period when it comes. You can imagine none of them ever come out properly!” Added another girl.

Rika did not lose sight of the Sabasaba Defence Force exhortation of clitoris from every woman young and old. It was not only gangs that did this. She knew of cases where doctors abroad had agreed to subject certain populations to this abuse.

She read that the militias reasoned mutilation was a way of cleaning the land of all its evils, which it seemed, were borne by woman. Refugees in other countries said they wanted to feel closer to their own cultures and that they were frightened of the way the West treated human life. Some spoke of cleansing but in a far away wintry land, what was there to cleanse? How did one begin to understand cultural change and development? What prison could be worse than this especially for

women, she wondered? At that time extra-judicial killings of young men in the villages and cities had not become so rampant. In time it caught world attention.

Craving for freedom

ZZZaaap! Rei slapped the book on the little table at the corner of the Swiss Bureau in Geneva. He had enjoyed reading *A Captive of Time* by Olga Ivanskya. It was a great old book about poet Boris Pasternak of Doctor Zhivago's fame. He enjoyed pronouncing Zhivago. Zzzhivago. It means living, in Russian, he had learnt. Living; not dying. The thought crossed his mind that it would be a good name for a child, his child. Zhivago.

My own child, a daughter or a son, it does not matter, called Zhivago! My own child called Life! Rei thought to himself. May be we could even live in Africa! But all that could wait. Marriage was a see-saw matter in his life. Now it was important, and then it faded perhaps just as one of his many girl friends got serious. He only met women who feared insecurity all over the world and could only live in their home towns. When at work in different places, he had no time for other thoughts. The huge continent stood in his eyes. His gaze focused on Kenya. 'Time I did real stories, a fine novel, made movies and documentaries,' Rei said to himself.

"I think you just do not have an interest in marriage, you found something worth living for," his colleague, Louis once told him.

"Right. I am passionate about making my impact to change the world. I want to write books that can be turned into great movies; I must get one of the finest novels on earth published!" Rei answered.

"Great!" Louis said, in his favorite one word answers.

Now, alone in the office, Rei walked from one end to the other and finally to his favorite wall library. Here he caressed the pages of books

women, she wondered? At that time extra-judicial killings of young men in the villages and cities had not become so rampant. In time it caught world attention.

Craving for freedom

ZZZaaap! Rei slapped the book on the little table at the corner of the Swiss Bureau in Geneva. He had enjoyed reading *A Captive of Time* by Olga Ivanskya. It was a great old book about poet Boris Pasternak of Doctor Zhivago's fame. He enjoyed pronouncing Zhivago. Zzzhivvago. It means living, in Russian, he had learnt. Living; not dying. The thought crossed his mind that it would be a good name for a child, his child. Zhivago.

My own child, a daughter or a son, it does not matter, called Zhivago! My own child called Life! Rei thought to himself. May be we could even live in Africa! But all that could wait. Marriage was a see-saw matter in his life. Now it was important, and then it faded perhaps just as one of his many girl friends got serious. He only met women who feared insecurity all over the world and could only live in their home towns. When at work in different places, he had no time for other thoughts. The huge continent stood in his eyes. His gaze focused on Kenya. 'Time I did real stories, a fine novel, made movies and documentaries,' Rei said to himself.

"I think you just do not have an interest in marriage, you found something worth living for," his colleague, Louis once told him.

"Right. I am passionate about making my impact to change the world. I want to write books that can be turned into great movies; I must get one of the finest novels on earth published!" Rei answered.

"Great!" Louis said, in his favorite one word answers.

Now, alone in the office, Rei walked from one end to the other and finally to his favorite wall library. Here he caressed the pages of books

he took off the shelf at random. Then his eye fell on the section where autobiographies were lined up. He picked up one. Mandela's kind and determined eyes looked straight into his own from a beautiful photo cover on his book *Long Walk to Freedom*. Coincidence? Or just funny? He did not laugh.

Rei was fascinated looking at the man whom Hugh Masekela, that famous singer, had in a recent show for Mandela's 90th birthday spoken with so much love! Masekela's eyes sparkled as he toasted to Mandela.

He could see a great scene in a future movie with Masekela playing his trumpet for Mandela and pumping his great spirit into the world. Those who saw Masekela said he looked like he was born singing and blowing from his cheeks right into a trumpet. The power of music filled the air whenever he sang; he and his instrument became one as it happens to a man and woman in love. In different parts of the world, 46664 concerts had been done to fundraise for the HIV/Aids cause in the presence of Prisoner Number 46664, Mandela. Now many HIV positive people received help in the prison of hunger and lack of treatment in his name. In Tromsø Rei had read that the Arctic Party was a great success.

Rei had been in London on a trip to cover details of the Blair Commission for Africa in May 2007. 10 Downing Street was action packed. Blair had resigned as Prime Minister. Rei returned in August, the summer of 2007, in time for the big shows for Mandela. 10 Downing Street was action packed. Photo clicks sounded like a million cracks of fireworks. The theatres too were packed with huge audiences when Hugh Masekela and others performed in praise of Mandela. Rei listened to the Sami Choir from Norway with delight. He thought it was fantastic. Sami yodeling songs reminded him of Maasai music.

A year later, Rei felt ready to do a challenging story from Africa. He could not explain why. It was more than that passion that took over the mind of an artist from time to time, consuming one. It had to be *that story*, regardless of the dangers and the demands of time it would

make on him. It had to be *that story*, no matter what criticism he would get from anyone. It had to be *that story* just as it had to be *those hours* of a dedicated search in a science lab for a scientist researching on a virus.

Rei recalled how Masekela celebrated Mandela in London. The songs sailing in the air with great zest soaked hearts with nostalgia with a tinge of pain. These are the songs Masekela sang for Prisoner No. 46664, to be released from Robben Island prison. Whenever Masekela was invited to sing as he had been in Nairobi even years after the release of Mandela, the crowd would roar that they wanted to hear him again sing for Mandela's release. Masekela still blared his world famous trumpet and sang vibrantly: "Bring back Nelson Mandela! -Viva!- I want to see him walking in the streets of Soweto!"

Facts streamed into his mind: Fact one, this man is easily the world's greatest leader in the 21st century and his message on human dignity, the greatest testimony of all times. Second fact, strange fact this one- it reinforced the coincidence of his picking up this book- the date. July 18th. It *is* Mandela's birthday. Rei's is on 19th July. Fact, three: Mandela is in love. Fact four: Prison years 27.

He paused and marvelled. What a gracious smile after such suffering. The man smiled from deep within. He laughed too. Grace was etched into this man's cells. Mandela had smiled and sang in prison cells. This man! Of him one could say, "behold the man!" And of each of the two women he ended up marrying and leaving, Evelyn and Winnie, one could also clearly say, 'What a woman!' Mandela must have lived those prison years with the secret of the fire of victory in his heart, how else could he have survived it?

Fact five: President of free South Africa for five years. He left office when he could easily have been re-elected. He honored his word, in Africa where old politicians have done the opposite, holding on to power until generations lose out. Fact six: Graca Machel. Lovely wife; one had to say: behold the woman! They were in love just like at the beginning but now for 9 years! Fact seven: How many sacrifices families of leaders make for freedom!

Rei felt fully attracted to Life in Africa. He felt like freedom was knocking on the door of his heart. He philosophized a little. He wondered if he could touch what he called the 'beyondness' of Africa. This longing was stirred more deeply as he looked at the orderly city he lived in. Was his desire for Africa just unruly idealism? It was not the first time he was going to the continent, but he felt like it was.

Wondering if one day the world would one day stop wasting time on race issues and other divisions. Rei hoped that one day all would fully acknowledge that Africa was the mother of freedom and of the human race. Would all of us then recognize our short sightedness? Has it not always been more about resources than colour? Would we see the folly of discrimination of races *within* the black race? Races within the other races? Castes? Or was it always necessary for people to look down on some people? A scholar from Latin America, Pedro Casal da Liga wrote about "Africa: the continent of the moment." How blind had we been for centuries or had we just wanted to label Afrika poor? Both the 'visibility of this blindness' and the truth about Africa, were fast becoming a school of thought. Maybe it was easy to put such thoughts in books but not on village markets or international stalls?

Rei had often gone through many other facts that made him feel like going to Africa. There were many exciting pillars of his thrill for Afrika, and they were valid. This time the desire to be just one more in Afrika overwhelmed him.

He remembered discussing this deep longing with his colleagues in London. None of them could really describe what it was about Africa that attracted them. It was then for the first time he realized most languages in Africa spell the continent's name as Afrika some of them even pronouncing it as Afirika.

"It is the allure of Africa, it casts a spell on one," said Will Seasons of the BBC.

"Maybe there is more to it. Well, Africa after all, was the home of many famous people and of all of us!" exclaimed Rei. Rei had been to

Senegal in West Africa five years ago; now he knew that something he could not define was calling him back to Africa. But this time, he wanted to see the Africa that did not have much voice or attraction for most people. He wanted it in sharp and real images on his mind and in words from those who had never lived anywhere else but in Afrika. That was important. Yet, he knew that Afrika had cities and just like any other cities of the world: gangs and thefts. He wanted to meet the Afrika that is so different from the Africa of *Out of Africa*.

He had read of a recent World Social Forum in which Jon Sobrino, claimed that God lived in the Kibera slums. People were stunned by this. All certainly knew that not all Afrika could be defined as heaven. But these thoughts were in local literature too. Ngugi wa Thiong'o was the novelist who called Africa, Abirika in his mother tongue. He wrote of people in Nairobi who kept saying that they had seen Christ boarding a bus at the General Post Office on his way to Kawangware, a lively neighbourhood. Ngugi was depicting total alienation. Sobrino had this powerful argument that the Christ on the cross today is not the one depicted on the walls of churches, but the one imprisoned in the poverty cross in Kibera. This for Sobrino was the Christ to be taken down quickly from the cross! Rei knew that his attraction to Africa was not the missionary type but even so, he was so full of zeal. He often thought it was women who were crucified in the slums of the world. Sometimes, he thought women and other people crucified themselves daily.

He opened the Mandela book and for a while he was lost again. Someone had cut out an article and put it in the book. It had been filed from Nairobi- the base of many foreign correspondents. A photograph of Graca Machel in Nairobi was on it. She bent down hugging a little girl. Graca talked about Aids orphans. Rei read how people wept as she spoke about the tradition of circumcising girls; that is cutting their private parts in what many rightly called female genital mutilation. Her words were as clear as her spirit. Tears are not enough.

When Graca was asked a question about Nelson Mandela; she said she did not wish to dwell much on an already publicized romance. Madiba, she pronounced his name tenderly, would be happier the more she spoke about children's needs. She paused and smiled. The journalist observed she must have been savouring that special intimacy which belonged to their hearts and which was tied to the soul of Africa. Love and sacrifices did not need to be explained in new words.

"Ask me questions about children in Afrika, about women's struggles, about my own struggles! And, I have had many! Ask me about how to stem this hurricane of the souls of the daughters of Afrika wherever they may be. In the mountains, in valleys and in deserts. Tell me how to recede from this silent terror that no one deserves."

Bluntness, they say in my village, does not knock at the door for permission to enter in . Cutting the *Labia majora*, *labia minora* and the clitoris all scooped out at age 12 or even earlier Rape in Darfur and Bukavu in the Congo.. and elsewhere. How do we take our first step to this freedom?

"Graca's bright and searching eyes," the writer had put down, "swept through the journalists as if she could read their minds." One awakened. Was she not panning then, for pain in their hearts, for that is what would lead to a deep dialogue and then articles and documentaries that showed the way to this freedom? It was clear She strongly believed in voices from Africa. Questions.

"Do you think the FGM catastrophe is Africa's biggest challenge?" She was asked.

"This happens in parts of Afrika but all Afrika is blighted by it. There are other beautiful things about Afrika but how will they shine in the world if our daughters' eyes are bleeding silently, not with tears but with pain? Simply put, lack of knowledge in Africa and outside of Africa, about Africa's values and her real quality and the lack of solidarity within her should shame the world."

Graca directed herself to a tall and dark young woman asking her if she shared the same opinion as she hugged her. Graca always spoke deeply all the time looking into the eyes of a particular person in the interview room, the writer noted. Rei felt as if she was addressing him now.

Rei read the comments the journalist had scribbled on the sides of the article.

‘Lack of information about Africa out there by people like you is a big problem. Some people from other parts of the world think that one finds giraffes at Nairobi airport landing strip, for instance. Some famous stars of African descent are even afraid of stepping back here. They do not know different countries, forget about villages, townships and slums. They just speak about this big thing they call Africa as they still see undefined things in their minds upon pronouncing the name, Africa. Africa’s authentic voice needs to, and deserves to be heard. The sad and the happy voice.’

Rei was completely carried away. He felt as if reading this had taken him beyond himself, as if he had developed new freedom wings; as if his soul, heart and head were in celebration. He felt beautifully free. He tried to phone Martel, his friend with a connection to Kenya but he thought e-mailing him would be better.

He flipped the article over and on the other side there was a photograph of a singer on stage on his knees and his dreadlocked hair falling to the ground.

Freed by words

Strange, Rei thought. He always raced everywhere with a book in hand. With books he disconnected with immediate realities and connected with the world of possibilities. He liked reading fiction. It was in fiction that reality became new creation for him. He used to say that in reading

Graca directed herself to a tall and dark young woman asking her if she shared the same opinion as she hugged her. Graca always spoke deeply all the time looking into the eyes of a particular person in the interview room, the writer noted. Rei felt as if she was addressing him now.

Rei read the comments the journalist had scribbled on the sides of the article.

‘Lack of information about Africa out there by people like you is a big problem. Some people from other parts of the world think that one finds giraffes at Nairobi airport landing strip, for instance. Some famous stars of African descent are even afraid of stepping back here. They do not know different countries, forget about villages, townships and slums. They just speak about this big thing they call Africa as they still see undefined things in their minds upon pronouncing the name, Africa. Africa’s authentic voice needs to, and deserves to be heard. The sad and the happy voice.’

Rei was completely carried away. He felt as if reading this had taken him beyond himself, as if he had developed new freedom wings; as if his soul, heart and head were in celebration. He felt beautifully free. He tried to phone Martel, his friend with a connection to Kenya but he thought e-mailing him would be better.

He flipped the article over and on the other side there was a photograph of a singer on stage on his knees and his dreadlocked hair falling to the ground.

Freed by words

Strange, Rei thought. He always raced everywhere with a book in hand. With books he disconnected with immediate realities and connected with the world of possibilities. He liked reading fiction. It was in fiction that reality became new creation for him. He used to say that in reading

and writing one can create their own world, taking away pain and limitations; flying for a while. He enjoyed writing.

Rei often times lived 'a life' with a book, a sort of liaison that would leave an imprint on him forever. Books he had read were his friends. He sometimes thought some books called him from the shelf with a story. How else could he explain why he hit on *A Captive of Time* last time and this time *Long Walk to Freedom*? How he admired poet Boris's love and greatness! Boris's love affair with art was life. Rei could understand that. Art was open, alive and engaging. He felt it could perhaps be for him 'being' and love.

Boris's description of poetry fascinated Rei, he memorized it. BL as they called the poet in short, said, "*poetry will always remain that celebrated peak, higher than all the Alps, which lies in the grass at our feet.*" Rei liked that. Peaks and feet!

Rei was in bliss recalling these lines. He knew how a writer could spring from pain to joy, knew of great writers forged by sorrow. He wanted to meet and witness this same expression in different cultures; cultures that had gone through painful changes with and because of the rest of the world, but that were enveloped in silence in his world.

Rei's heart again sensed the beginning of something stirring his soul deeply. This man Boris, the poet, said sublime things. He said "art lives in others" and the way he said it suggested the way others said in theology that the image of God lives in each of us. Rei was intrigued. He would have loved to listen to Sobrino and BL chatting.

The voices of the social poets in the book, *Captives of Time*, fed Rei's quest for justice. Funny, the names: Akhamatova, Ivanskaiya, Politkovskaya, Zinaida, Ivestia, Zhivago and Yuri; so well resonated with African names he knew. If he could deal with these names, he could handle names anywhere.

The door creaked a little and Rei almost jumped. It was Louis.

"Oh, this African violet is going to die!" exclaimed Louis.

“Miki has just watered it, but I hear it needs less water and none directly on its leaves and roots. A little water in the saucer holding its pot is just enough.”

“I will remind him of the office manual for indoor plants. We do not want to lose any of them. Remember we have spent money giving them what they need to survive our difficult weather. My wife would be distraught if we got it wrong this time!”

“Sure,” Rei said, as he poured himself a cup of coffee from the dispenser in the corner and sat down with his book in hand. Rei worked part-time with Louis. Miki was the administrator, and the only person constantly in the office. A few months ago, they had agreed they did not need a secretary anymore. Computers did perfect filing, coffee was easy to fix and mobile phones rendered the telephone operating machine useless. The office worked.

“These reports from Amnesty International on Kenya are depressing,” said Rei without adding his latest thoughts on going to Kenya. Rei was a disciplined artist. He used to say that all art was very well organized unlike some people thought. He believed artists need to congregate with other artists as much as they need their solitude.

Rei handled the Human Rights docket and volumes of reports to United Nations Refugee Agency under United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR. Louis did most of the stories on agriculture for the Food and Agriculture Organisation and sent them onwards to his colleague, Clerigi, in Rome. Some of the stories were filed by local journalists from countries such as Chad, Senegal, Sudan, Somalia and Kenya; Rei and Louis disseminated them on internet and to small publications all over the world.

With his first volume of poetry out, Rei was keen to get all his work on the net too. He had a website *www.faces.com*. In it, he had one poem titled “A ship full of Faces” and it reminded him of Goree Island. On this island, from which slaves left Afrika through the door of no return, he had written a horror piece describing their faces in great detail.

On read it, one got the feeling that chains and pain came alive all over again. The poet saw noses and eyes all over the floors and walls of the dungeons now converted into museums. Every time, he read it back, he dreamt about it. But in the dream the piece would become a narrative broken with song. And the song was invariably one of those they called Negro Spirituals ... but it began with a humming so similar to one of Michael Jackson's *uuuummmm, mmmmmm, mmmmmmm, mmmmm* in *Will you be there?* He would then see Michael with his new hair and pained face dancing away powerfully. Rei would wake up, sit up and think.. As usual, he philosophized a little about uniqueness. He drew wisdom from ordinary events, he would describe himself as a non-theist.

The green velvety leaves of the African violet sitting on the small round table were yellowing a little but they had streaks of green in the main leaf, a sign of hope for their revival. The deep green at the base of the leaves remained strong.

Rei had a favorite secret spot especially when rays of light streamed in through this window in the summer. He sat there using the black desk he loved and worked from for hours. Recently, he was really puzzled by events in Kenya. He was always glad that their little office was not all locked up from light, as was the case with many other offices in the city. Rei preferred to read his mail down the street in that cozy cyber café where he could have his cappuccino. That was the perfect thing to do now. It was about to rain.

Pregnant danger and hope

Café Bruno, Geneva, Switzerland. Early evening. Rei's stout and sensitive hands enjoyed touch-typing. Those three shrubs have started to flower, he saw looking through the window at the neat row of short, stout and well trimmed shrubs facing the toyshop opposite the café. They are of the family of purple flowering magnolias. The neat little row could

On read it, one got the feeling that chains and pain came alive all over again. The poet saw noses and eyes all over the floors and walls of the dungeons now converted into museums. Every time, he read it back, he dreamt about it. But in the dream the piece would become a narrative broken with song. And the song was invariably one of those they called Negro Spirituals ... but it began with a humming so similar to one of Michael Jackson's *uuuummmm, mmmmmm, mmmmmmm, mmmmm* in *Will you be there?* He would then see Michael with his new hair and pained face dancing away powerfully. Rei would wake up, sit up and think.. As usual, he philosophized a little about uniqueness. He drew wisdom from ordinary events, he would describe himself as a non-theist.

The green velvety leaves of the African violet sitting on the small round table were yellowing a little but they had streaks of green in the main leaf, a sign of hope for their revival. The deep green at the base of the leaves remained strong.

Rei had a favorite secret spot especially when rays of light streamed in through this window in the summer. He sat there using the black desk he loved and worked from for hours. Recently, he was really puzzled by events in Kenya. He was always glad that their little office was not all locked up from light, as was the case with many other offices in the city. Rei preferred to read his mail down the street in that cozy cyber café where he could have his cappuccino. That was the perfect thing to do now. It was about to rain.

Pregnant danger and hope

Café Bruno, Geneva, Switzerland. Early evening. Rei's stout and sensitive hands enjoyed touch-typing. Those three shrubs have started to flower, he saw looking through the window at the neat row of short, stout and well trimmed shrubs facing the toyshop opposite the café. They are of the family of purple flowering magnolias. The neat little row could

have been part of the things in the toyshop. They might as well have been plastic, they were so neat. Rei felt artificial every time he looked at them. He had felt this many times on other streets for years. It was hard for him to explain what feeling artificial from looking at something natural meant, so he did not speak about it. He was sure his girl friend would not understand it. Well, now he had the street view. Girls and women and men walked down there in apparent freedom. They fit in their summer tops and shoes well. They were not mutilated, he thought with worry writing itself through wrinkles on his face. He wondered how mutilation affected the minds of the women who went through it in some cultures of Africa and Asia. But for certain, even these girls in Europe, some of them from other continents, had issues to deal with too: drugs, alcohol, serial killers and even mutilation. People committed suicide often in the West; and euthanasia and abortion were controversial. Different worlds, different problems in what we called a global village. After so many years on the planet the human race still found sexuality matters complex, taboos were everywhere and what was in secret was greater than what we all knew. Perhaps secrecy was the stumbling block, it knew how to hide both good, evil and everything in between.

A little sweeping wind found no rubbish on the ground to carry up and store in the leaves of the trees as he had seen in some tropical countries. The wind felt and looked like a sterilizing liquid swooshing out of a spray bottle and going round the leaves making them fold in before seeming to lick the clean ground again.

He still had a little more time: www.Reflections. He browses. Menu pops up. His password: 'Magic2'. He lands on a site on inspiration. Would you call it African just because it was set up by an African? Does inspiration have race? He read a poem there. It was titled, *Leading the Night*. He moved on. The site was set up on the eve of Obama's election in the United States of America.

He read international news between sips of coffee. Aha! news from Kenya. Kenya was special for him. Headline, "MP calls for ruthless crackdown on the Sabasaba Defence Force, a gang." Nairobi April 2007. "Three cabinet ministers differed on how an unlawful gang operating in Nairobi and Central Province should be dealt with. Whereas two of them ask the Commissioner of Police to deal with the young people in the gang ruthlessly, a third argues that this would be abuse of human rights. He says, "This is a socio-economic problem that can only be solved by creating more jobs for youth. He likened the gang to Mau Mau fighters who won Kenya's freedom. He said that politicians owned incredibly huge tracts of land and the poor had nothing to their name."

Rei thought. No employment, no land, no love, no life! And in their day to day lives, he added, especially during the election period, the people, whom he interchanged with the poor, looked up to sweet-talking politicians for all these things: employment, land, love, freedom and even a life! They innocently saw politics as public love. But many politicians knew how to love and hate in one tongue; who would check who? Political tongues and deed led people into the darkness of complete hatred anywhere in the world. They started by blinding the media, breaking the good mirrors society had of itself. They disliked even more those writers who kept on looking and feeling and seeing. Those ones who were blunt in use of names and who used languages they understood.

Rei had read about the gang before. He called it the mili-gang. He knew how such groups grew in countries where most people were poor youth. Rika knew that too. Such groups, she knew, grew like the fast tendrils of a pumpkin planted on soil that had swallowed heaps of cow or goat dung. She had seen that in her home village.

Different groups had their own fearful characteristics. The mili-gang was accused of circumcising any women they thought were uncircumcised. In one village, the story of how Tita lost her hearing completely was told.

“Mother, when will you get circumcised?” Her own son asked her one morning. He had been watching her move here and there in the compound. The question was sudden and so unexpected. She heard it and then heard noises begin in her head. She heard a big bang in her ears and she never heard again. That was the story she wrote down to answer the ear doctor whom she was asked to see.

The mili-gang went after those women who had escaped the ritual of getting mutilated after becoming Christians. This also meant that they were educated in Western ways for at the beginning for an African to become a Christian, reading prescribed. In many African languages the word for ‘believers’ was the same as the word for ‘readers’. Now the gangs rejected any Christian faith. But most of them knew how to read and write. They were un-traditional in practice. Boys cut women in circumcision. Who were they then? Rei had a small newspaper cutting.

“ Sit properly Grandmother!” Said a booming voice of a young male.

“Oooh iiiii, children of mine, am circumcised already. My age group is now dying out. How do you do this to me? How dare you look at my nakedness? Children, do you beg me to curse you?” But the young men circumcised her. She was 85 years old.

This kind of circumcision was of course far from a traditional practice. It was naked of ancestral acceptance. It was like the mutilation that was practiced secretly in the city of Nairobi and in capitals abroad by people who had taken refuge.

Rei’s mind went back to two girls he had interviewed in Senegal. After very deep silence, Amina spoke about the wound of all wounds and the scar of all scars describing her great suffering. He asked her to record her own story but then Amina refused to. She said her pain was always alive in her, always with her as it was never in the past. She said writing about it would make her bleed again. Rei respected her choice and left the topic at once.

Amina preferred to sing and mumble as she did her daily chores. She was afraid, she said. Very afraid. She had met a University lecturer who frightened her with his justification of mutilation. He spoke of it as he smiled, saying it was part of the culture and religion of a people without which they lost their dignity!

This lecturer said he wondered if writing and filming painful things about Africa did not tie down the continent to its sorrow, killing its many joys.

When Amina left her country on a boat to go to Italy, she knew many people had died on similar journeys. She knew many boats had been intercepted by police and there were no survivors. She was already a tortured soul. When things went wrong and she was tossed out into the sea by guards, she was already a soul on its wings, fleeing. Her effort to find a safe place in the world was ended, as was her pain. But her pain multiplied in all those who were still being cut even if she did not know them. Elsewhere, a tearful grandmother nursed wounds of rape and mutilation.

It was not surprising that some women could not speak to people like Rei or Rika. They preferred silence in suffering. Perhaps their silence was a language of resistance. Silence had always been an important conversation in life. The silence that listens and cries, had always been here. The art of the silences that speak was well known. But the world had little time for silence today, and certainly, not the silence of those numbed by pain.

Rei wondered what the root of this custom was. He knew that some countries in Africa now had laws against it, but it was still practiced in secret. Rika too had tried to understand this for long. Why was mutilation so important and why had most cultures in the world been so fearful of women's natural being?

Rika sometimes thought that perhaps fear of what was feared most was dealt with by instilling of pain. Which woman would ever allow another woman close to her private parts- unless to help her deliver a

baby- if a woman had been responsible for the pain of mutilation on her body? Even help for delivery was just tolerated by women who had been mutilated, for one had to have it.

But again, circumcision was clearly to Rika, based on a moment of license to talk, sing and handle sexual matters which were taboo outside of such ceremonies. If one listened keenly, it was obviously meant to instill boldness, a sense of belonging to a peer group, and to make young men and women direct their bodily functions to the opposite sex. It definitely clearly divided men from women. In this content, it was said, there were no other possibilities. Everyone fit into recognized categories of being and behaviour. Marriage doors of men to women were open only after this ritual.

Rei picked up his bag, paid his bill for coffee and African news. He had read a couple of other stories about Nairobi and e-mailed his friend Emile letting him know he had already spoken to Rika and that he was set to meet her in Nairobi.

For Rei, the urge to go to Nairobi was now an obsession. He wanted to understand the gang and mutilation.

Song of the underworld

That night, Rika got home early. News of a grenade rolling away under the feet of clients and between the legs of the tables at a restaurant woke her up with a start. She had fallen asleep on her living room couch after a light meal of rice and stew. Almost staggering into her bedroom, she slumped onto her uncovered bed and was off to sleep in a minute. Her children did not disturb her. They called such nights, Mummy's peace nights. They knew they had to be quiet.

Rika did not sleep well. She and most journalists had been recalled to their desks after 9pm. This had never happened before.

All re-called staff arrived in near panic to find a woman who said she had a prophecy on a podium speaking. She wore high headgear and some strands of hair fell on both sides of her face. The headgear sort of fancily covered her forehead and Rika, could not see her well enough. What a quick and strange turn of events. It was as if night had turned into day.

Two hours passed and the woman refused to leave the newsroom. She was screaming on top of her voice and yet her voice was filled with fear. Everyone had to say 'Amen' at the end of everything she said.

The moment she started to talk about the secret militias which had invaded the country and which most people were calling gangs, all TVs and radios rushed into this media house and gave her live coverage. Listeners and viewers were stunned. They telephoned newsrooms to find out if what they were hearing and seeing was truly going on. The media, wary on reporting on gangs, found solace in broadcasting her messages simultaneously on their channels. Shared action made them bold. Rika was perplexed. Was this a dream? Rika pinched herself to make sure she was not dreaming and she felt the pain.

Everyone in the newsroom sat in their desks as the woman went on talking about the engulfing fear and taking over of the city by gangsters. She said these gangsters did not respect women, least of all rich and single women. She said the reason why she had come by night was because the gang Leader had ordered her to do so. The other option was her death.

Still speaking very loudly, the woman said she had been commanded to execute her act as directed minute by minute by the gang. A step backward or a step too far ahead, she had been warned, would lead to her death. She had pleaded to send a press release but that was turned down. She was given three steps to take. She had to stand on the dais, scream her message and hit the headlines and be on TV news. She was told her hands would be chopped off the next day and displayed in the town for all to see, if she failed in this.

Her watchmen at the gate of her house, she said, had fallen to the ground when they saw the young men come in. They knew it was the gang. The driver she summoned had crawled over the fence to the steering wheel begging for mercy. Once he started driving, he looked straight ahead of him and did not say a single word.

Now the woman revealed her main message. She said the gang was going to go to the seven gates of the city before taking to the seven gates of the country, in the near future. Nairobi, they said was the main gate of the country and within it, there were the seven gates of the city that were to be made known before the gates of the whole country were visited. They threatened they could make Nairobi very small in an instance. Reduce it to no gate at all if it did not open doors for the remotest parts of the country to be part of Kenya.

Rika sat up with shock. She stared with her eyes open very wide at the woman on the dais. The woman was sweating. She dried rivers of sweat with a white cloth. Then she wiped her face beneath her eyes adding much pressure on the part under her nose which scientist call the philtral dimple.

Suddenly, a little cut beneath her nose and inside her dimple which had now become a seared scar got uncovered once her foundation cream and powder were wiped off with one of the swipes she made. Rika immediately recognized her. She was the powerful business woman who often met with the *bling-bling* men at night. Rika shook with rage. Was she creating a sideshow to cover up for more serious happenings in the night businesses? Had the *bling-bling* men, the snakes of the upperworld forced her to create a smokescreen? Had she changed and decided to play redeemer? Or had the gang actually challenged her finally?

Rika knew one thing, the gang had certainly discovered her businesses. They were angry that she had all this money. They were angry that she sold girls off to businessmen. They were angry that she had these powerful and strange men, not just the *Lukiimam* but others too, always negotiating money with her.

Well, it was her. She was not wearing golden clothes tonight. She was covered with a long black tented dress. After screaming herself hoarse almost all night, she left. Her voice became like a trumpet calling for all to follow her to the gates she talked about.

That night journalists, some even in night clothes Rika could see, were all awake. Rapid action started. There was a rush all over the city. Journalists almost flew to the mentioned seven gates. They went in different groups too. They went to: Railway Wakuli Market Station, the main long distance country bus stop now nicknamed Machakos 'Airport', Wind Muthaig Akiba Golf Course, Parliament House and Uhuru Park Nyayo Monument and Maji Kilimo House. The Seventh Gate, the woman had said was always with them and they had to discover it themselves. In all those places, the journalists kept vigil waiting for the young men who were to brief them. Journalists with cameras and notebooks and pens camped all night long.

Dawns the darkest night

At 3am sharp, the first shrill and powerful sound broke the morning like the birth of a first born in the furthest tip of Kenya in the North. It shook the earth and journalists in Nairobi did not hear it. Other trills, sharp and clear came from the women and joint they became each time louder. This ululation never stopped. The sounds came from the South, the East and West and together they reached Nairobi as all women joined in. The sound from the mouths of young women penetrated the ears of the journalists in the city, and only then did they begin to hear the uproar. There were sharp ululations all over the city. All the journalists stood when stout, short, tall and determined women came in ullalating. Then as if they could see a hand wave them to slow down, the ululations all over the country stopped in one minute. It was the community voices, peoples own singing, radios, sms, and internet spaces that had been used to conducted the whole exercise.

Well, it was her. She was not wearing golden clothes tonight. She was covered with a long black tented dress. After screaming herself hoarse almost all night, she left. Her voice became like a trumpet calling for all to follow her to the gates she talked about.

That night journalists, some even in night clothes Rika could see, were all awake. Rapid action started. There was a rush all over the city. Journalists almost flew to the mentioned seven gates. They went in different groups too. They went to: Railway Wakuli Market Station, the main long distance country bus stop now nicknamed Machakos 'Airport', Wind Muthaig Akiba Golf Course, Parliament House and Uhuru Park Nyayo Monument and Maji Kilimo House. The Seventh Gate, the woman had said was always with them and they had to discover it themselves. In all those places, the journalists kept vigil waiting for the young men who were to brief them. Journalists with cameras and notebooks and pens camped all night long.

Dawns the darkest night

At 3am sharp, the first shrill and powerful sound broke the morning like the birth of a first born in the furthest tip of Kenya in the North. It shook the earth and journalists in Nairobi did not hear it. Other trills, sharp and clear came from the women and joint they became each time louder. This ululation never stopped. The sounds came from the South, the East and West and together they reached Nairobi as all women joined in. The sound from the mouths of young women penetrated the ears of the journalists in the city, and only then did they begin to hear the uproar. There were sharp ululations all over the city. All the journalists stood when stout, short, tall and determined women came in ullalating. Then as if they could see a hand wave them to slow down, the ululations all over the country stopped in one minute. It was the community voices, peoples own singing, radios, sms, and internet spaces that had been used to conducted the whole exercise.

There was terrific noise of footsteps marching regularly. This announced the arrival of the gang. At the gates, special feats were performed by the young men and women: cartwheels, high jumps, hurdle jumping and even some walked on steeples. There were some who walked on their heads. They said that the ululations served to warn the government that they were strong. They had come to say they were tired of not getting all the money they wanted to get, jobs and fair shares of land. They wanted justice.

At 6 am, Young men in rough attire and very rough hair now burst forth as if from nowhere. They sang in defiant tunes and body movements and in glee. They handed leaflets to journalists and told them they were not to write the news because they had already written the news themselves and they knew what they wanted to broadcast.

The journalists were ordered to spread this news from and to the people all over the city. They did so, becoming vendors of news instead of processors of news. They were to send news from the people to the people. The people had the courage to be their own news and vigilance. It was a wonderful morning.

When Nairobians woke up, the whole town was covered with pamphlets that demanded: The immediate release from prison of their Leader who had been arrested and charged with imagining change. They said they were tired of waiting for food, the jobs that the youth had been promised, a new constitution, books, land and freedom! They wanted power devolved to the village within the next 24 hours but they already warned that power was in their hands!

The journalists received the pamphlets in trembling and took them all over the city. They took the biggest number of them to Parliament. They covered the Mausoleum and Parliament grounds with them and left a heap at Harambee House. The young men stood there with their twisted hair, dancing and sniffing up tobacco into their noses.

They said they wanted the next representatives in Parliament to be of their own choice. They said they were tired of being led by the *walala*

hai meaning those who have sound sleep and are wealthy. Before they finished they sang a song with all their might. In this song, they swore to shed blood if nothing ever happened to change their plight. They swore that the time had come for them to sing and dance wherever they wanted to. They said they had found all channels of expression and all roots to power blocked and opened them. They added that they had found journalists waiting to be bribed and sitting on the power of information and decided to educate them to fit in modern times. Was it strange they asked that there were no police arresting them for doing this? They explained to the journalists that they were the new police.

In bed must later, Rika had a dream. In a moment the gates and the young men were surrounded by tankers and armored vehicles driven by paramilitary squads. The vehicles spread everywhere surrounding the city. She saw that paramilitary men looked like a sea of moving worms, army worms in the Uhuru Park. Rika trembled in her longest dream ever now. The men lay everywhere with some of them moving stealthily among their colleagues. Rika felt pain in the tips of her fingers. It was terrible to feel that if one man gave the order of “kill” all these men and women now usurping the color of the jungle and of the earth would shoot killing their mothers, brothers, sisters and fathers, cousins, aunts, nieces, nephews, grandfathers and grandmothers. They would. They would kill their friends and former classmates if an order was made. Rika felt pain, intimidation and frustration mix up in her mind. A terrible sense of helplessness invaded her and she tried to wake up but she could not shake the dream off. She felt as if she was rising from a deep pit. Her dreamy mind wafted back to the newsroom. There she saw young reporters kissing the feet of the woman who kept them up all night. They were shaking hands with the women who ulalated happily and even the young men and women were here in a happy mood. They were all lumped together in the way that dreams bring and take one to places. There were no questions asked. All seemed to feel an effusion of sisterly power between them. Rika was puzzled by the dream when she woke up completely, but she was not afraid.

Nairobi, cool waters

Rei closed his mini laptop obeying the flight attendant's rules on KQLM 566 Boeing 777 aircraft. He stuck his thumb into the button on his right hand arm rest, pushed the back of his seat slightly forward and buckled his safety belt ready for landing at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport.

He can sense this is no ordinary trip. He remembers his dispatch on Facebook just three words: "Off to Nairobi." Many comments came in: "Good luck!", "local T beer", "Enjoy!", "Eat kachumbari and nyama choma", "M. Mara". Lucinda, his girl friend reminded him to take care of his money and passport. He smiled. She had told him so several times when they had dinner together. She had reminded him on their last phone conversations, and there she was on again on fb!

It was as if he saw the articles all over again, there again on a screen in-front of him. Rei had a photographic memory. His notes and poems were often in his own alphabet. He sometimes wrote as if he was making real things like quilts or wall hangings. Lucinda loved him but felt she could never reach him. She had almost given up on his ways. She spoke a lot and he expressed himself minimally in ordinary language apart from when he wrote reports for the United Nations.

As the craft cruised to landing, Rei was so excited that almost all the articles on Kenya he had googled on his flight swam before his closed eyes. They came dancing down his memory as he closed his eyes: 13th July: *Ten tremors and uncertainty about possible volcanic action down in Tanzania's Ol donyo Lengai, "Mountain of God" in Maasai*. The tremors shake Nairobi and architects say that 90% of Nairobi's buildings are poorly constructed. In another article: Kenya's tourism stand comes first at the tourism fair in Berlin. The world of contrasts, Rei thought.

Tourists do not stop traveling because of insecurity. 'Isn't there danger everywhere? The idea is not to expect no risk but to rate the level of risks,' one had written on a blog. The article was framed by photographs of herds of buffalo.

On Rei's mind, there was that other headline. "The US issues a travel ban on Kenya." He wished the US had issued an alert on Nairobi/Dar bomb attacks on 3'8'98 or even on 9/11?

The little rumble is on and a female voice on the loud speaker: *"Mabibi na Mabwana, tumetua katika uwanja wa Jomo Kenyatta Airport Nairobi. Hali ya joto sasa ni nyusi kumi na tatu lakini itaendelea kupaa mpaka ishirini na tano. Katika eneo la Nairobi, jua litachomoka saa kumi na mbili. Mmekaribishwa sana Kenya. Kwa niaba ya Captain Musuve wa Kenya Airways na sisi sote tunawatakiwa wakati mwema. Asanteni kwa kuchagua kusafiri nasi.*

Ladies and Gentlemen, On behalf of Kenya Airways we welcome you to Jomo Kenyattta Airport..... Kenya, the pride of Africa.

Rei's memory screen goes on and on as the plane taxis for the next ten minutes. A stream of ideas goes through his mind. Dramatic Kenya! and always on the surface of it all, land of great potential and peace. UK lifts her travel ban but most of the tourists arriving are from America where the ban is still on. Rei jumps up to open the luggage bay. He pulls out his light travel bag. Seven days in Nairobi!

There are many more tourists from Japan and Korea. China might not tour but her presence is visible at government level and in local projects. One enormous billboard at Nairobi's main airport was testimony that caused acrimony for some time.

Nairobi people know their city is called Nairobierry but they are smiling and happy as far as you can see; even in the slums. The spirit of Nairobi, a place of cool waters, as named by the Maasai at the beginning of the 20th century remains cool. The spirit of Kenyans and Kenya is: *hakuna matata!* Rei had to get himself T-shirts with that logo and others if nothing else. *Hakuna matata*, how two words can say it all was fascinating. Lion King the movie had taken that message to the world. Many people loved Nairobierry and Rika lightly joked that it rhymed with berry and blackNberry. Rei carefully took his mobile phone out of his breast pocket and fit it in his belt pocket. He was eager to step out and walk.

Cities all over the world were exciting but dangerous too; Rome, New York or London. May be Mecca was safer than Rome. Certainly from the point of view of thefts, Rome lost the game.

Rei's tall figure towered over most of the other passengers as they filed out of the airport. His beige hair was well trimmed and did not call attention, one saw his handsome oval face. But for now Rei's thoughts were centered on Nairobi and what he knew. Recently a gang, perhaps two, *that* faces mountains for prayers: Mount Elgon and Mount Kenya, two very beautiful spots were more in the news because of gangs than because of special species of flora and fauna. There was no news about how traditional religion related to nature.

Nairobi, Kenya. It was the city many Congolese people sang about. Nairobi always driven by politics and the social underworld moving beneath impressed some Tanzanians too.

"And when you get to Nairobi", they sang, "tell them we are on our way!"

In many ways, you could see that the two huge snakes and their babies gave 'life' to the underworld of the enchanting green city in the sun. In the spirit of teeming wild life, maybe there many dragons teeming too.

Of life and death, often the latter was more striking, and they lived here too as they do in all cities. Nairobi is Nairobi with all its intricacies. *Matatus*, journalists, slums, red -light district, a city like any other city, but this one is Nairobi. Rei was happy.

This is where Rei wanted to be for just seven days this time, but he also wanted to see other parts of Kenya. He could take the short flights available daily at cheap rates to most parts of the country. Eldoret, the eldorado of the Boers moving up from South Africa in the early 20th Century and the serene Cherangany Hills he would have to miss this time. He would not visit Mombasa or the sung Kisumu of *Kisumu ber* (beautiful) which stands washed and washing into the waters of Lake Victoria, the source of the Nile. He had flown over the Nile all the way

from Egypt. There was so much to see in Kenya, but Rei had a burning vision.

He had read much about different *regions* of Kenyan but always sensed one calm Kenya, had things changed too fast or had he been deceived before ? The Rift Valley still lay with a chain of fresh water lakes like a deep blue necklace on the heart of the country, linking it to the Red Sea. Who wanted to remember the violence of rifting when the Great Rift Valley was formed long time ago? This valley even if still threatened by volcanic action was gorgeous now. The beauty of the Valley would remain indelible in Rei's soul and eyes. The power of certain places casts an image that lasts and lasts on the soul. Our own vision is the prototype of photography.

There were places whose power was in making one penetrate their uniqueness. They offered themselves as originals, untouched and unexplored by anyone else. They honored each set of eyes as if it was the first to ever see it. They seem to keep saying nobody else could see them with anyone else's eyes. They gave the impression that they were guarded by wonderful invisible beings. One had to revere such places and their spirit, if one's dignity was rooted in mind and soul.

These were magical places for some people. They went beyond any one being, beyond us. Humans always took notes or photos of them, and even sometimes said they had discovered them for the rest of humanity. They deceived themselves. Some of these places were unknowable in the very way that some say God is. The truth was that nobody could discover them for another. The feeling was that they were places for free beings that made one love the places and love oneself. These were places that should have embarrassed our desire to possess and meddle; to shed blood in order to own what no one can really own or grab for they are beyond us all.

But today, it was sad to note the news. the alluring Lake Turkana which they say was part of the cradle of humankind needed help to stay alive. It needed, like the Mau Forest, a water catchment zone and many

other water bodies to be freed from human greed. Lake Turkana and the other water bodies were in danger of death. Where would the home of soft creatures that should teem in waters that give life be? What will dry humans look like?

Kenya

Rei was not going to miss any chances. He was used to late hours. Reading about Kenya in the past, he had wondered, and this discussion had come up in London, how Kenya maintained her beauty in spite of so many contradictions about her.

The Sabasaba Defence Force! Why, they are interesting and some facts about them drew much curiosity. They pray, facing Mount Kenya and their own secret select mountains and hills.

They have rituals and are asking a main question about Kenya's poor. Who made promises to them and then broke them? Rei in their eyes is a defenceless white man! The Sabasaba Defence Force he knew, were anti the *mzungu* as the white race was nicknamed for what some people say was apparently wanting to go everywhere in Africa. *Kuzunguka* is an infinitive verb for going round and round which is similar to *kizunguzungu* which means dizziness. *Mzungu* is a noun in the singular form in the *A/wa* first class of Kiswahili nouns which hosts all life, persons and all living things.

But now, Sheng, or a mixture of English and Kiswahili spoken in towns had the term *Jungu*. Luckily it was still in the *A/wa* class of persons and living things. In Kenya, some Africans knew they were called *Miro*, a name they called themselves too. It seemed as if these names were needed for simple conversations. *Coolie* was derogatory and so was *Chute*, a name that hang around for Asian people. Was this a language of economics more than of colour? This world arrogantly divides itself

other water bodies to be freed from human greed. Lake Turkana and the other water bodies were in danger of death. Where would the home of soft creatures that should teem in waters that give life be? What will dry humans look like?

Kenya

Rei was not going to miss any chances. He was used to late hours. Reading about Kenya in the past, he had wondered, and this discussion had come up in London, how Kenya maintained her beauty in spite of so many contradictions about her.

The Sabasaba Defence Force! Why, they are interesting and some facts about them drew much curiosity. They pray, facing Mount Kenya and their own secret select mountains and hills.

They have rituals and are asking a main question about Kenya's poor. Who made promises to them and then broke them? Rei in their eyes is a defenceless white man! The Sabasaba Defence Force he knew, were anti the *mzungu* as the white race was nicknamed for what some people say was apparently wanting to go everywhere in Africa. *Kuzunguka* is an infinitive verb for going round and round which is similar to *kizunguzungu* which means dizziness. *Mzungu* is a noun in the singular form in the *A/wa* first class of Kiswahili nouns which hosts all life, persons and all living things.

But now, Sheng, or a mixture of English and Kiswahili spoken in towns had the term *Jungu*. Luckily it was still in the *A/wa* class of persons and living things. In Kenya, some Africans knew they were called *Miro*, a name they called themselves too. It seemed as if these names were needed for simple conversations. *Coolie* was derogatory and so was *Chute*, a name that hang around for Asian people. Was this a language of economics more than of colour? This world arrogantly divides itself

into three races and a few languages. It often forgets every village has its lingo and every race, its races.

Capturing African voices telling their own story was not going to be easy. Rie knew that there were entire philosophies in languages. This was something he could only attempt to do with much support from the people he would meet. He felt inadequate but excited to try. He had not told Rika about his secret plan to investigate the gang. He was afraid that her advice to him would have been to forget it and stay in Geneva. After all, he knew that the Sabasaba Defence Force were against dealings with Caucasians. Some members of the mili-gangs wanted no connection with the Western world. Yet others realised that some contact was useful. They spoke to journalists from time to time. They knew that their work could give them un-paralled international exposure. This would make Kenyans fear them more. This would make people feel their power and even get confused about the secret gang with international wings. They liked to see people from the West feeling and looking challenged and sometimes even threatened. They like their feeling of power over others. For them, it was great to see educated people both local and foreign seeking them out. Their leaders were informed. But strictly too at this stage, their strongest weapon was mainly in privacy and secrecy- mystery. They only let out some information, well scanned and studied and no more.

“ Only 50\$ sir, for taxi to the city. Taxi! taxi! taxi! sir?” the man pleaded.

Rei was making his way out of the airport. He knew the story of the foreigner and taxis in African and other cities. There will be the cab owned by a company. A handsome amount would be asked for a ride in a taxi owned by a company. Then there was the one owned by an individual but which depended on a broker who met you right at the arrival deck as if you had given him your arrival time before. In Nairobi, before the brokers were were pushed out of the venue, you will pay the taxi amount and his commission inclusive. Then there is the humble

driver who is at the wheel of a visibly run down machine, that cannot even afford to pay up a parking bay at the airport but which works so smoothly, you are surprised.

Some famous people both local and foreign have an un-written sympathy pact with these 'poor' cabs. They know that they will soon be knocked out of business in places like the airport where the country does not want to show off its national hard worker but only its high flying achievers. So where the broker of the posh car had started by telling you, if you are typically a foreigner- only "50\$", this lonely cab will take less than 25\$. You know you are in good hands. It is the story of transport in many places.

In Nairobi, no matter what, however, there appears to be a silent pact between all taxis. None of them should be seen on the roadside stalled because of mechanical failure, or unable to move because they run out of fuel and their tank is empty. You will see everything else being towed away in Nairobi: Mercedes, Nissans, private salon cars... but never a taxi. There is honor for the \$ here. These cabs are serviced in private by local mechanics who can make them move almost for a lifetime without a breakdown. They are the pride of *jua kali* workers. *Jua kali*, stinging sun: working under the heavy heat to make a country thrive in this and other business and getting little national recognition. From the airport, *matatu* travel is not easy. There is a bus service but people find both personal or taxi means more reliable. As for the train, one looked forward to the day it would connect to the airport.

But the rest of Nairobi was ready to rush into *matatus*. The language of *matatus* was totally different from the courtesy and unspoken taxi codes of conduct. Except when of course, cabs were used to rob, and then language mattered little.

A *matatu* trip started with the eyes. Your attention is commanded by their looks. "Color me badd!" was the inscription in pretty orange and beige on the sides of one *matatu*, Rei read. He was fascinated by the fleet of Nissan *matatus* he saw. One had a football, flying high on

its rear door and all around the upper cabin. Below the ball were many names with exclamations: Pele! Zidane! Thuram! Drogba! Etoo! Diego! Thierry! The slogans could take you round the world in five minutes and bring you back to Nairobi. For *matatus*, Nairobi was the centre of the world. On the other side of the same *matatu*: Kadenge! Oliech! Mariga! Mulama! Masinde! Osiako! Osiano! Taiwo, Nyandoro! run the names of local football stars. There zoomed another *matatu* moving faster: Friends of Colombia, were the big letters painted on it. It was a famous vehicle that daily took bread to a distant village in Murang'a. It was a part of a big *matatu* fleet that had replaced two famous Murang'a buses Kayu (a famous word which a Professor at the University of Nairobi used as an example to show how impossible it was to translate some words) and Mwinjoyo (another famous word which the same Professor used to show how languages expressed their power. The word meant enjoying but in a personalised form again impossible to translate.) Marley. Dube, Che. Mandela. Obama, Lille Wayne, Michael Jackson, Fifty Cent were all *Matatu* Prize Heroes. Rei had not seen the one with 'Kofi Annan the Negotiator' drive past him. The Kofi one was a long minibus that negotiated dangerous corners on roads as if it could fall on one side. Before it was fully out of sight, a bus with the phrase *Wangari Maathai, kiboko yao...* (Wangari Maathai, beats them all!) zoomed past. It was a good one for such a macho world, Rei thought. He noted that no Kenyan presidents and politicians were heroes on *matatus*. *Matatu* touts had had enough of them on bank notes and coins. *Matatus* were not easy on politicians. The debate on their having color and decorations was raging. Apparently, these contributed to accidents according to the government. The law wanted all that creativity scrapped and only one yellow line in the middle of the car's body, like a yellow karate belt.

The taxi driver shared with Rei that *matatus* had also been stopped from playing music but that some even had small monitors and showed their own selection of movies to their passengers. Fundi, the cab driver,

explained the heavy music was not good. He explained how his wife told him their baby would leap in the womb with the music and she would feel quite uncomfortable. Fundi had joked that maybe their child would be a musician. He had tried to make light of a matter that seemed to worry his wife too much.

Looking at the *matatus*, Rei thought that if there was one thing Kenyans could defend and that was as certain as that Kenyan athletes will take gold, silver and bronze in marathon competitions any time, it was their spontaneity.

Matatus

Rika thought of the *matatus* as behaving almost like political opposition but on the roads. The difference was that *matatus* opposed, broke traffic rules and most of the time delivered good service. The potholed roads she could see as a government that was opposing its own job. All politicians needed the people to check them. *Matatus* would only change in the way the people wanted if every passenger became a law enforcer. The roads would also be maintained only if the people kept insisting this was a basic need. For now, *matatus* made lanes along both sides of tarmac main roads and went over, around or through potholes depending on their speed. A new minister concentrated on repairing roads for months and the good results were visible in many places before the government cut back spending on roads. One player could make a difference, it seemed. However, one player was not often allowed a budgetary allowance that would help him or her make a difference that would make all people admire them too much for that would be like giving the highest power to that politician.

The *matatu* placed profit as the main goal but the official opposition lost its voice if salary increments were discussed. The Opposition

explained the heavy music was not good. He explained how his wife told him their baby would leap in the womb with the music and she would feel quite uncomfortable. Fundi had joked that maybe their child would be a musician. He had tried to make light of a matter that seemed to worry his wife too much.

Looking at the *matatus*, Rei thought that if there was one thing Kenyans could defend and that was as certain as that Kenyan athletes will take gold, silver and bronze in marathon competitions any time, it was their spontaneity.

Matatus

Rika thought of the *matatus* as behaving almost like political opposition but on the roads. The difference was that *matatus* opposed, broke traffic rules and most of the time delivered good service. The potholed roads she could see as a government that was opposing its own job. All politicians needed the people to check them. *Matatus* would only change in the way the people wanted if every passenger became a law enforcer. The roads would also be maintained only if the people kept insisting this was a basic need. For now, *matatus* made lanes along both sides of tarmac main roads and went over, around or through potholes depending on their speed. A new minister concentrated on repairing roads for months and the good results were visible in many places before the government cut back spending on roads. One player could make a difference, it seemed. However, one player was not often allowed a budgetary allowance that would help him or her make a difference that would make all people admire them too much for that would be like giving the highest power to that politician.

The *matatu* placed profit as the main goal but the official opposition lost its voice if salary increments were discussed. The Opposition

disappeared altogether for some time as all politicians closely watched their pay packets.

You always had a *matatu* on the road happily and freely pointing out that there is another side to every law on the road. Sometimes they created their own law to suit themselves as when they hiked fares because of El Nino rains, and hiked them too high for they said they had higher maintenance costs. What would a desperate passenger do but swing into the *matatu* to avoid the floods that even swept off smaller cars?

Matatus were a law unto themselves. Sometimes when they opposed a policy they appeared showed their invincible side proudly. They shored up resistance in an unjust society where the power to move and make money is the power of the politician over the people, power over others and never power with others. *Matatus* claimed and took their space.

I am a *matatu*, the *matatu* says, and not a taxi or a bus. I must show I am different in Kenya. I must guard my space before it is hogged. Many envied the *matatus* defined freedom was quite shocking Rika thought, when they hiked fares because a bomb had hit Nairobi. On that day, many people had gone home late after volunteering their services to search for lost children and bodies trapped in the debris. Others had hopelessly wandered in the city looking for missing friends and relatives and in the end, many of them could not afford *matatu* fares. They walked home.

The very next day, the *matatu* tout would be wooing passengers early in the morning, promising them happiness at the end of the day. On every route they would win the people over with their sweetness and music. They won each time you thought they should have lost. On Sundays, church tunes were playing in the *matatu* as they waited for people to board but immediately the vehicle took off at a speed no passenger could negotiate, rock and hip hop took over. Some passengers were lucky to hear reggae and some local music.

Matatus soon struggled to fit in safety belts, to have one color-white, with a yellow line, a uniform for the conductor and driver. Even

so, many of them still resisted. They run off with color and music. The driver's photo was by law part of the dashboard decorations. Selective Order. Colour, music, photos and belts seemed to matter most. Passengers were over charged at the random will of the crew. They had to make their money and the owners money. The ban on music was always defied. Perhaps the music, apart from attracting passengers gave the crew a sense of security. Perhaps it gave their imagination a refuge, a place to to run to away from the common stinging heat and so many other troubles they had to bear.

Silent city

The Hotel Gama was in a silent and secure place away from the city din and yet, right in the city. Nairobi had a number of places that could surprise you by how near they were to the city and yet so far from the commotion they were. Leafy silence invaded such places. It was hard to remember the busy zones from there. The Nairobi National Park was less than half an hour from The Gama. The hotel shared a fence with Nairobi National Museums.

Dila Flats where Rika lived were a walking distance from the city. Rika loved the three large Nandi flame trees whose multiple trunks she could see from her bedroom. She lived on the second floor. The French windows showed cream and lacy curtain blinds. There was a constant graceful breeze that moved the branches and leaves of the trees she saw below. Rika loved the other trees facing her door and closer to her flat too. She called them 'monkey trees', *Mikima*, directly translating their name in her local language. She had only seen a monkey once on those trees and the kids had gone wild shouting about it that Saturday afternoon. The big block was built on a hill.

Rei bought a local sim card and dialed his girlfriend Lucinda immediately.

so, many of them still resisted. They run off with color and music. The driver's photo was by law part of the dashboard decorations. Selective Order. Colour, music, photos and belts seemed to matter most. Passengers were over charged at the random will of the crew. They had to make their money and the owners money. The ban on music was always defied. Perhaps the music, apart from attracting passengers gave the crew a sense of security. Perhaps it gave their imagination a refuge, a place to to run to away from the common stinging heat and so many other troubles they had to bear.

Silent city

The Hotel Gama was in a silent and secure place away from the city din and yet, right in the city. Nairobi had a number of places that could surprise you by how near they were to the city and yet so far from the commotion they were. Leafy silence invaded such places. It was hard to remember the busy zones from there. The Nairobi National Park was less than half an hour from The Gama. The hotel shared a fence with Nairobi National Museums.

Dila Flats where Rika lived were a walking distance from the city. Rika loved the three large Nandi flame trees whose multiple trunks she could see from her bedroom. She lived on the second floor. The French windows showed cream and lacy curtain blinds. There was a constant graceful breeze that moved the branches and leaves of the trees she saw below. Rika loved the other trees facing her door and closer to her flat too. She called them 'monkey trees', *Mikima*, directly translating their name in her local language. She had only seen a monkey once on those trees and the kids had gone wild shouting about it that Saturday afternoon. The big block was built on a hill.

Rei bought a local sim card and dialed his girlfriend Lucinda immediately.

“Hello!!” came Lucinda’s quivering voice over the phone. “Oh, you are there!?!?”

“Yes, am finally here!”

“Now, listen to me. Nairobi I know is great but quite dangerous too! I know you love risks, but please don’t go out walking in the night the way you did when you arrived in Washington DC, which is even more dangerous. In Nairobi, nightlife is short. In fact, it does not exist!”

Trust her, Rei thought as she went on and on as he just kept going, ‘hh!’, ‘hh!’, ‘hh!’ until she stopped and he answered her quickly. He was doing his best to keep well tempered and not shout at her on the phone. As if he had not been to Bangkok and Detroit and gone back home.

“No. I won’t take any risks. I will sit in my room and read!”

“Darling, I know you, but all the best!”

“Honey, I won’t be long. I’m only here for seven days.”

“Yes. But when you come back, you will be first buried in writing for fourteen days, and then when you finish, you will jump onto another project!”

“I know dear, but we will find time!”

“Maybe we can even do three days at Lake Constance when I come back?”

“Good idea! But promise not to bring pen and paper!”

“I can promise to leave my laptop, but I can’t promise not to have pen and paper and books! I will try to be with you all day even if I have to scribble at night!”

“How is your hotel?”

“Nice and country style right in the city but far from the crowd.”

“Good. Enjoy it!”

“Nairobi is full of life. Can you imagine this morning, I arrived to a demo by many women some of them of mixed race, declaring that they are children of British soldiers and that they were raped many years ago?”

“Oomph! That is a story!”

“They are suing and using one of Britain’s best lawyers.”

“I wonder how they can prove anything after the years?”

“It will be argued that they offered favors for money from the soldiers!”

“Yes, but world militaries have had these issues all the time. You know about UN Peacekeepers in different parts of the world. You have heard the United Nations is plagued by sexual harassment scandals. You know all that stuff about the Internal Oversight Body It is sad.”

“I agree ...”

“Well, we speak again tomorrow.”

“OK honey, love you and take care!”

Before breakfast that Friday morning after which he intended to have a nap, Rei looked through books and magazines in the little hotel bookshop. He read about tourists Bob and Sharon who came to Kenya every year to see the 600 or so bird species guided by some local boys in the different areas. He confirmed a booking for the Mara on Saturday early afternoon, returning on Sunday evening; and Turkana for Tuesday afternoon, to see some caves there. He knew he had to do these flights to get good material to contrast his story. He also needed it for his security as he would appear to be just one more tourist. Bob and Sharon had also gone around to visit a few old Mau Mau places near Nairobi and he wished he could do that.

He turned the pages of The Sabat News and here was an article by Rika. The story was fast paced and full of damning details on some politicians. His adrenalin ran. In the editorial, a lament. One trillion shillings lost in corruption, in such a poor country. The Permanent Secretary for Reform in the new government had gone into exile. His photo was on the front page. He looked stern and hard nosed, big and able; but he was in hiding. Rei had never known real fear. Now he felt suddenly quite frightened. He knew that there were many people who were fearful of handling what he wanted to deal with. But he kept on

thinking: the real voice of Afrika, the real voice of Afrika, and he vowed to go on. He was sure of what he had to do. He feared much more for Rika. Those gory stories of murders he had read began to fill his mind. How did Rika keep sane he wondered. He continued to read the story of a woman who died while being circumcised in a village where the mili-gang lived in disguise because of the police efforts to exterminate them. The members had dropped their dress code, but they did carry out their ceremonies and were determined to make their mark.

Nairobi's heartbeat

Rei strolled through Nairobi as if his life had just begun. He had to see the city for the first time on the same morning of his arrival. Three hours rest and he had lost the light headed he had before he slept. He found out first hand about some interesting places. The people in the city, some of them, no doubt just passing through looked busy.

The monument to the fallen soldiers looked stuck in-between the Kenyatta Avenue roads. To see it well, one had to risk the traffic passing too close and a matatu pressing in to one's back. Rei looked at the three African soldiers closely. Fighting for the British to come home to British colonisation must have been more than one could bear? Some argued for colonisation. The Nubi of Kibera were settled on land in Nairobi by the British also after fighting on their side.

Rei would not have known that somewhere nearby some people crowding a shoe shine man were discussing things their parents told them about relatives who went to World War II. He was eager to cross the road. Opposite the post office he went straight into an oddly dark enclosed monument. It showed signs of recent renovation. A globe in the middle. At the bottom on the wall, distances to the main cities of Kenya indicated: Mombasa, Eldoret, Kisumu and Nakuru. All of them are destinations accessible within about 45 minutes flight. Some people

thinking: the real voice of Afrika, the real voice of Afrika, and he vowed to go on. He was sure of what he had to do. He feared much more for Rika. Those gory stories of murders he had read began to fill his mind. How did Rika keep sane he wondered. He continued to read the story of a woman who died while being circumcised in a village where the mili-gang lived in disguise because of the police efforts to exterminate them. The members had dropped their dress code, but they did carry out their ceremonies and were determined to make their mark.

Nairobi's heartbeat

Rei strolled through Nairobi as if his life had just begun. He had to see the city for the first time on the same morning of his arrival. Three hours rest and he had lost the light headed he had before he slept. He found out first hand about some interesting places. The people in the city, some of them, no doubt just passing through looked busy.

The monument to the fallen soldiers looked stuck in-between the Kenyatta Avenue roads. To see it well, one had to risk the traffic passing too close and a matatu pressing in to one's back. Rei looked at the three African soldiers closely. Fighting for the British to come home to British colonisation must have been more than one could bear? Some argued for colonisation. The Nubi of Kibera were settled on land in Nairobi by the British also after fighting on their side.

Rei would not have known that somewhere nearby some people crowding a shoe shine man were discussing things their parents told them about relatives who went to World War II. He was eager to cross the road. Opposite the post office he went straight into an oddly dark enclosed monument. It showed signs of recent renovation. A globe in the middle. At the bottom on the wall, distances to the main cities of Kenya indicated: Mombasa, Eldoret, Kisumu and Nakuru. All of them are destinations accessible within about 45 minutes flight. Some people

just below were enclosed in a smoker's zone. Kenya had taken anti tobacco rules seriously when a powerful woman was in charge of the Ministry of Health. Seeking out faces on the streets Rei could see that Kenyans in Nairobi were often too engrossed in their problems. They looked preoccupied. They said some of them even forgot their homes in the villages. How could they go there and still look poor after they had been to the city? Others preferred to forget what they had seen on their last visits there. Burnt down homes and many graves.

As for Koinange Street, no one could have accurately provided the night picture of this street for him. He had no idea it would turn out to be a pivotal point for his research. Rei was organized for intense work. He would fly around this beautiful country to deflect attention from his real concerns. He felt Kenya was naturally a place for great travel. This visit would allow him to immerse himself in his already unfolding plot. He walked past the Hotel Inter-continental, crossed Uhuru Highway and enjoyed the green park. He crossed back again lower down near Parliament buildings and walked to the Railway Station. He already had a complete feel of Nairobi between the map and this walk.

Back on Moi Avenue he walked in search of Kimathi's statue. He had read on internet about the erection of this statue recently in Nairobi. He was tired but he did not feel it. He was not surprised. He sometimes reacted to air travel by feeling wide awake especially when he gained time. When he finally fell on his bed without opening his sheets, and lying on top of the blankets, it did not take him long to drift off to sleep. It was as if he was wafting on clouds.

Song of Yaadi

Yaadi is back from his day's work. It is Saturday evening. Everyone believes Yaadi is a stonemason. He builds in Nairobi and far; snaking out over 27 kilometers to green Limuru and even often coiling over

just below were enclosed in a smoker's zone. Kenya had taken anti tobacco rules seriously when a powerful woman was in charge of the Ministry of Health. Seeking out faces on the streets Rei could see that Kenyans in Nairobi were often too engrossed in their problems. They looked preoccupied. They said some of them even forgot their homes in the villages. How could they go there and still look poor after they had been to the city? Others preferred to forget what they had seen on their last visits there. Burnt down homes and many graves.

As for Koinange Street, no one could have accurately provided the night picture of this street for him. He had no idea it would turn out to be a pivotal point for his research. Rei was organized for intense work. He would fly around this beautiful country to deflect attention from his real concerns. He felt Kenya was naturally a place for great travel. This visit would allow him to immerse himself in his already unfolding plot. He walked past the Hotel Inter-continental, crossed Uhuru Highway and enjoyed the green park. He crossed back again lower down near Parliament buildings and walked to the Railway Station. He already had a complete feel of Nairobi between the map and this walk.

Back on Moi Avenue he walked in search of Kimathi's statue. He had read on internet about the erection of this statue recently in Nairobi. He was tired but he did not feel it. He was not surprised. He sometimes reacted to air travel by feeling wide awake especially when he gained time. When he finally fell on his bed without opening his sheets, and lying on top of the blankets, it did not take him long to drift off to sleep. It was as if he was wafting on clouds.

Song of Yaadi

Yaadi is back from his day's work. It is Saturday evening. Everyone believes Yaadi is a stonemason. He builds in Nairobi and far; snaking out over 27 kilometers to green Limuru and even often coiling over

endless hills for 72 kilometers, into Murang'a. Sometimes he made a shallow dive into the Rift Valley 75 kilometers from Nairobi and worked in Naivasha. He has come home, but there is the work of the night yet to be done. Wairi is very scared of him, but she is his bride.

Very loudly without any mumbling, he recites a creed that begins with assertion of his identity. My name is Yaadi wa CheChege, I was born for the mountain and circumcised one early morning on the banks of river Nyaga. I was frozen cold but I did not wince; do you hear me? Snuff my tobacco I do, snuff my tobacco I must, I Yaadi wa CheChege, because tobacco gives me healing. Hey there brother, I sing for justice. Up there into my nose, do you hear me, and a *tishooooooo! A tishooooo!* I sneeze and I feel faith in me. I face the mountain. Am not hostile, it is the world that is unbearable. I pray peace, I call it, *thaaai, thaaai*. I must look for peace, *thaaai*. Peeeaace *thaaai* for my brothers have died, *thaaaaai*. This is my dirge. My life is a dirge. The one I sing when I am alone and before we go to the ritual of the goat and at the river. I am only a human being! I will live only once! I was born only once! Circumcised once! *Haaaiya, thaaai*, bless my home, *thaaai*. All powerful One, listen. Just give us enough food for my nation to eat, *thaa!* We need money, *thaa*. We want to live like people do in the world outside of slums! We want power. We are committed to principles for a cause. A just cause! See how these people in power behave? They inherited power from the British and now they want to pass it on only to their own children. Our grandfathers fought for freedom and now we cannot afford even to buy a simple bed, a mattress? Bed sheets are for the rich, we say. Our grandmothers were buried in poverty and by poverty circumcised many times. Yaadi was getting into a reverie and just realized it was time for him to leave for the slum's riverbank for it would soon be dark. There he would not sleep. Even in the house he did not sleep when he was in the shack. He snuffed tobacco, he chewed *khat* and never touched a woman except once in three months. Even then, he would touch her to beat her but not to have sex. He beat her often and

she endured. She had no voice. Wairi was a heap of silence in the corner. Sex, Yaadi knew, would be taboo until the struggle was done. There was no other desire on his mind. There was only a goal, a target. Focus was not negotiable.

“Shut the door behind me. Push the lock carefully. You must be brave now. You are a Sabasaba Defence Bride. I know you are delicate but you have spent months with the other Sabasaba Defence Brides. Now you know the rules. You know you cannot break them. You know how you must have your hair done. You know you must never wear trousers. You also know that you do not just get married to me. You got married to the cause! You know you cannot let out our secrets and neither can I. You know that here secrets means everything that you see me do. You see nothing, you see? You hear nothing, do you hear? Silence is our code. When they try to catch us, we teach them silence too. Where I go at night, you do not know. When am not here, you behave as if I am, because I am. Your job is just to be here and to be quiet. You must dress like all our brides. Eat what we eat and behave like Bride One does. You must. Otherwise you die. You cannot go anywhere and the day you do go somewhere, first I will beat you but leave a little breath in you, the next time, if you ever leave my house, I will just kill you.

We do not fear death to obtain justice. It is a necessary consequence of betrayal!” he yelled. He now gulped down vast amounts of air and breathed out from deep in his lungs trembling and sweating. He sounded as if he was slowly doing all that he threatened in his imagination. Hearing her, strangling her, killing her. He made sharp and quick sounds at last as if to celebrate his work. He now smacked his lips with satisfaction. Wairi was petrified. He was entranced by the dance of the three snakes that cast a spell even on people who never saw them with their own eyes. Their venom surrounded the city and sucked out of it every human thread relentlessly.

Wairi's response

Wairi's eyes opened wide. She was stiff with apprehension. She was numb all over. She was a captive of fear and yet fright was not allowed in this 'land'. She had to take life from pain. Death was not her first option now. As soon as he left, she counted thirty, two times. She quickly took off the rasta hair weave sewn onto her real hair, which Yaadi had never noticed as he never hugged or caressed her. Her lovely oval face with eyelids that slanted towards the tip of her ears was revealed. Now, she had no hair falling on her forehead. Daring spilt out of her guts and filled her lungs. She put on a little slip of a tiny black dress, a long black coat and was in the city in fifteen minutes.

The *matatu* tout cheered her as she alighted. "Eeh, Madamu you are a winner!" he said, referring to her good looks, as he stroked her back as she alighted. For Wairi, it was as if nobody spoke. All she cared about is that she had a bag with her carefully clutched under her arm. In the toilet of the first BP petrol station she saw, she first urinated for very long and then changed into other clothes. She put on her little sharply finished pumps with small sharp heels. Clip! Clip! Clip! Was the sound they made on the pavement. It was easy for her to look chic in town as her next stop would be a call girls night salon. She got in and was greeted by the others with great cheer.

"Eeh! Wairi! Ngai! Take my five!" One shouted as she helped her in. The slap of their two palms made a unison sound filled with the happiness of recognition. Maybe it was thier little clap of thunder. Every night, they were prepared for dry thunder, rain afer thunder of just a high wind. Twenty minutes after, her short hair had a clean, dark shiny look. Her little pretty face showed her lovely open curve up, 'C' upside down shape eye brows. Her teeth were gleaming and she was beautifully made up. She too needed to have money and a good time. That is what every clip, clip, the sound that her nice sharp heels made, told her. She was going to the girls' corner in Koinange Street. She stood there now,

between the monument dedicated to the fallen heroes of World War II and the Basilica church. The Gama Hotel where Rei was sleeping off his tiredness was quite near. She from time to time would change directions and face Uhuru (Freedom) Park. It was cold tonight, but her little mini skirt which she changed into in the salon, was warm. It was a flashy red and she had hoop earrings on her trim size ten body with a tight abdomen and not very expanding little thighs.

Before the crack of dawn, at 4.30 am, she was back in the shack with her rasta wig on. She was a smart girl. All the make-up and other things were in the salon. She kept her money with Mama Flava who gave out male condoms to night girls in the city. Her “husband” was never to know where she kept her money. One day, she thought, if she ever met a rich white man who could help her leave the country, she would just go, go anywhere, just like the wind. If he asked her to fly in a balloon to a distant island, she would. She had seen balloons flying tourists on hotel advertisements. How lucky those who flew in them were, she thought. She would even take a balloon to the moon if that was the only way to get away, she had thought before she met Rika.

Those bad luck stories of girls who were trafficked to greater slavery were many. The reality of girls and women who died on the way to Europe, a long with many men was well known. There were also lucky experiences. Stories about women who made money and then found a partner were always shared among the night girls. Some women managed to change their lives, others stayed forever sex slaves out there and also at home. It was true that some women would choose selling their bodies anywhere and never take another jon. They saw this as their work on earth.

Now, some of the girls who went abroad kept in touch. They told of places where their children had gone to school without paying school fees and become great professionals. They told of places in the world where their children had become wealthy. They never talked about failure or frequent arrests in new lands. They spoke about great success and so

much they had achieved for daring to step out. She would do anything to get help from him whom she never knew. Near the church, she stood still. A sign of the cross danced quickly on her chest as she kissed her middle fingers. She said an Our Father, and again like a flash of lightning, another sign of the cross danced across her breast. She felt happy. She knew that prayers were not only for nuns. It was not written, “ask (ye holy ones and you shall receive!), It was just ‘ask!’...anyone could ask. It was a fact that if she ever left gangland and lived in Nairobi, she would eventually be traced and murdered. So many girls had been. So many men had been. Her private parts had been badly mutilated in exchange for living at Yaadi’s and being a ‘bride’. This guaranteed her and her relatives, poor sexual desires.

Experts say that the human brain listens to parts of the body even as it sends messages to other parts. Violence in one part of the body went to all the body, including to the brain which kept sending it all over the body. At her young age, Wairi felt pains all over her body every day as she slept in the shack in the afternoons.

Rei had read about men, murdered and skinned alive; heads severed and left at a distance from the torso in parts of Kenya. The story of corpses with missing limbs: tongues, private parts both male and female and breasts were common in the news. He feared for Rika. Many of the women were raped and mutilated and in the end, they were like lifeless and limbless torsos even when they got treatment. These murders were supposed to be the gang’s short action message (sam) to the government but was that really true or was someone framing them? At times they only murdered senior Kenyan cops; who were working with them when the gang members sensed possible betrayal. Wairi never came close to the cops she and her friends saw in the nights. What if one of them was a friend and accomplice of Yaadi? That some were, was no secret.

No one could be sure who anyone was in this.

The song of the mobile phone

Rika's mobile phone first lit up and then its melody went on. It started with a rapturous beat that run into friendly river flow beats. Ra, Ra, Ra, ra, chuuusssh, chuussh! The melody was called Moonlight. Her little gadget sang with its flip cover looking cutely at her each time it rang. It had a blue face that lit up again and again becoming infused with silver light.

"Hello! Rika?!" there was some noise in the background and after a while it was disconnected. Rei was wondering if he got the wrong number. He checked again and thought to call a few minutes after. What he did not realize was that Rika's phone was regularly tapped by Kenyan police. He however, knew that all over the world intelligence was interested in journalists and writers. Rika knew it too and did not fear. She answered every phone call, including those that marked up as 'unknown' or 'private number' or even 'no number'.

She received calls from bishops, judges, MPs, ministers, call girls, managers and even people in the gang. She had once been summoned to State House. She alerted her colleagues and went in good company but was received alone. She was offered great comfort on her visit. In the course of the conversation many names of people whom the Big Man had helped directly were dropped.

There were very clever hints in his smile when he talked of that journalist who used to 'talk' but who now drove a Mercedes. Rika was offered a beach plot, one of which was owned by the Big Man himself. He then tried to offer her a job abroad, to begin with as a press officer in a foreign mission. Rika had turned a deaf ear and told the old man. She told him stories that he could hardly comprehend about the economy before simply and politely indicating she had a commitment to attend to. She had gone dressed in a T-shirt and her favorite journalist's jacket and flat shoes.

This powerful and big man asked if she wanted to shop in London and Paris sometime in the near future and if she would not enjoy being

dropped to her office in one of his many cars, but she answered she had an office car waiting for her. He got the message; but there was no indication he would relent. Her phone was tapped even more after this.

Tapping phones, was becoming the normal thing now, and it did not bother most people in Kenya any more. It was too common. People get used to anything, and they became carefree. They said the security could go tell it to the birds... they needed to know this bothered no-one in Kenya any more. You could tie a string to a sparrow's leg in Murang'a village and still it will fly and track its way to a remote place in Russia, to a place many people in Africa would never reach. It was meaningless to try and curb communication at this age of internet.

Noon reflections

The little phone lit up again and Rika answered fast.

"Morning Rei, had a good night's sleep?" she asked

"Yes, I did. Thanks."

"Hi Rika! I am sorry about the first call...I

"Don't worry about that..Rei."

"Right! Coffee today?" asked Rei.

"Oh, fine, May I suggest the *Thorn Tree* at The Stanley. Then I will show you the message Martel left on the tree for his friends who come to visit Kenya from all over the world?"

"Wait a minute, what does that mean, messages on trees? When I think of trees in Kenya, I remember the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Prof Wangri Maatai!"

"Wangari Maathai," is the right pronunciation! Rika, never let anyone off on names.

"Oh, yes, she is greatly admired in the world. We will talk more about her. I want to see Freedom Corner. I want to see the trees she planted there for peace.

dropped to her office in one of his many cars, but she answered she had an office car waiting for her. He got the message; but there was no indication he would relent. Her phone was tapped even more after this.

Tapping phones, was becoming the normal thing now, and it did not bother most people in Kenya any more. It was too common. People get used to anything, and they became carefree. They said the security could go tell it to the birds... they needed to know this bothered no-one in Kenya any more. You could tie a string to a sparrow's leg in Murang'a village and still it will fly and track its way to a remote place in Russia, to a place many people in Africa would never reach. It was meaningless to try and curb communication at this age of internet.

Noon reflections

The little phone lit up again and Rika answered fast.

"Morning Rei, had a good night's sleep?" she asked

"Yes, I did. Thanks."

"Hi Rika! I am sorry about the first call...I

"Don't worry about that..Rei."

"Right! Coffee today?" asked Rei.

"Oh, fine, May I suggest the *Thorn Tree* at The Stanley. Then I will show you the message Martel left on the tree for his friends who come to visit Kenya from all over the world?"

"Wait a minute, what does that mean, messages on trees? When I think of trees in Kenya, I remember the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Prof Wangri Maatai!"

"Wangari Maathai," is the right pronunciation! Rika, never let anyone off on names.

"Oh, yes, she is greatly admired in the world. We will talk more about her. I want to see Freedom Corner. I want to see the trees she planted there for peace.

“I have walked around Nairobi. The Central Business District: the Hilton, The Inter-continental, The Basilica, Parliament, The main streets are all on my mind. Right. I will find the Thorn Tree at 12.00 noon is that fine?”

“No, let’s make it 11.20am, in time for me to attend a quick meeting and so that the Thorn Tree restaurant is not too busy over lunch, alright?”

“Oh, that’s fine. Thanks very much Riiiiika! Martel told me I could be confident with you as I have very little time. I have just read an e-mail from him reminding me of that.”

She flipped her phone shut and her mind went back to the paper she was reviewing. Many thoughts came to mind as she read through her own article. She was happy that this time, she had covered some public figures’ crazy nightlife and the editor- just like the last time she wrote on corruption- had not cut sensitive parts off. Thoughts zigzagged on her mind. She was truly glad. Oh, it was incredible! Killings by the rich and mighty went on all the time and were never covered for fear they would not be politically correct.

In buildings inside main streets of Nairobi wealthy men undressed and did what they wanted with girls. They entered into the only ‘home’ the girls had in them and shattered them. The most intimate of human acts was turned into a barbaric deed on poor girls. One older woman told Rika how a Sudanese man boasted to her that he could not possibly sleep with black girls. He was fair he said and from the North. He had enticed her anyway into a room and ordering her to take off her clothes, made her to parade for his lusty eyes. He all the time referred to how black and native she was, what big this and what big that she had. He humiliated her for a whole four hours before telling her she had nothing he could touch because she was Nilotic and from the South. Yet he slapped her body all the time. She said it was humiliating when he hit her with money. He said he was a *civilised man* and of Arabic descent and so his dark skin was not really dark as such.

Rika was angry. She knew one thing for sure. Many pretended not to know that men from poor families where these women came from, knew how their mothers and sisters were derided. They shut their minds to the fact that one day revenge would seethe unceasingly under the skins of the poor women and men. The underworld empires always hit back determined to win by any means, but that only the wise knew and wanted to remember.

Rika had what she called love of wisdom. She wondered why guilt never plagued the rich killing them. Thoughts about nightlife speared her imagination. This business acknowledged by all civilizations, the world's oldest profession puzzled her. Today, it gripped her mind in a special way. She almost spoke loudly to herself.

Why? Could it be that we used longevity to excuse this business that was so unfair on women here? And, once in it for three months, this she knew well, young women got hooked. She had seen it happen to so many girls. No matter how humiliated they were, they stayed on. Somewhere deep in their minds was the idea that this is what they were born for and the only thing the world would accept of them. In spite of even owning a good bank account, the girls just would not go onto a different business. They learnt to laugh, walk and smell like their trade. It easily penetrated all their senses. They dressed for their skills and they did their work with a painful passion. They laughed often, to beat the pinch of pain in their guts. Some of the men who were their clients appeared to stop coming to them in time, but they spent nights telling stories about the many girls they had 'met'. They discussed numbers. They re-lived every case in some of their meetings and many could not count how many times they had been there. What happened when the girls passed the age of 45 in this profession? Rika thought that would be another article, but after some months. She had seen older women who retired to the lower backstreets and owned pimping businesses. Some of those women went back to their rural homes when they were about to die of Aids complications which included cancers.

Now she thought about the strange reality. Two creatures from different worlds tied together by a long dark night entangled in the war of centuries: money or life. A war none of them could fully define. Recent interviews had revealed that some new girls on the street did not come from poverty-ridden homes, but from the wealthy class where the girls felt unappreciated. They wanted to betray someone. They had to hit back at what they felt was their own betrayal and the betrayers. These were often daughters of rich parents who had travelled all over the world and were often in politics. These men often had several women in different parts of Kenya and of the world. Their children lacked a sense of belonging in the complicated families and it cost them nothing to walk away. They were classy enough to dance with the underworld openly. When they did not go into the night, they had endless affairs in *matatus* touching a world that had long been forbidden them, riding roughshod and breaking all the rules that their parents so panicked about.

Stripped

One night, an old man who was frequently on Koinange Street in the wee hours to pick up a group of girls and take them all to one room, almost had a heart attack when driving with his group of girls he heard the voice of his own daughter laughing. The girls sprang their own surprises at leading the night to dawn. Sometimes they turned the day of people's lives into a dark night. The rich old man who heard his daughter's voice in the car died as he staggered from the same car to enter his house. He had not stopped when he heard his daughter's laughter the previous night. She had laughed all through the orgy he had organized.

There were unusual girls who- like Wairi - were seeking their freedom in this darkness. Wairi who was often beaten up at home too,

Now she thought about the strange reality. Two creatures from different worlds tied together by a long dark night entangled in the war of centuries: money or life. A war none of them could fully define. Recent interviews had revealed that some new girls on the street did not come from poverty-ridden homes, but from the wealthy class where the girls felt unappreciated. They wanted to betray someone. They had to hit back at what they felt was their own betrayal and the betrayers. These were often daughters of rich parents who had travelled all over the world and were often in politics. These men often had several women in different parts of Kenya and of the world. Their children lacked a sense of belonging in the complicated families and it cost them nothing to walk away. They were classy enough to dance with the underworld openly. When they did not go into the night, they had endless affairs in *matatus* touching a world that had long been forbidden them, riding roughshod and breaking all the rules that their parents so panicked about.

Stripped

One night, an old man who was frequently on Koinange Street in the wee hours to pick up a group of girls and take them all to one room, almost had a heart attack when driving with his group of girls he heard the voice of his own daughter laughing. The girls sprang their own surprises at leading the night to dawn. Sometimes they turned the day of people's lives into a dark night. The rich old man who heard his daughter's voice in the car died as he staggered from the same car to enter his house. He had not stopped when he heard his daughter's laughter the previous night. She had laughed all through the orgy he had organized.

There were unusual girls who- like Wairi - were seeking their freedom in this darkness. Wairi who was often beaten up at home too,

had to run away from some dangerous encounters as she tried to get what she wanted without selling her body all the time. She could never risk a new scar because her 'husband' would know it was not a scar he caused and he would beat her up to death. She became an expert at hiding scars and dodging men who might injure her in visible places. But some men pinched her in hidden places because she had no clitoris or labia to offer. They had been cut up by an old woman who prepared brides of the gang and who got paid for this and whom the men in the gang praised as the best artist they ever had.

The woman cutter was never incarcerated as the street girls often were. She continued with her cruel job. She mutated like a virus much to the benefit of the men. You might even hear learned grandsons praise her style of mutilation and the benefits it brought on society. You could hear the ridiculous argument that "this as a whole benefits our society!"

But for Wairi, so many men nearly killed her when they found out what her private parts looked like. Some spat on her and asked her why she dared wear make-up if all she had was that; nasty little hole. She always tried to disarm those who were not drunk with a smile without words. Those who were drunk did not know where they were and had no time for such observations. After such nights, after Yaadi left, she slept in her shack until mid- morning. She would then dream she was a panel beaten *matatu* that was always full of passengers but which could not move. She would wake up sweating and wish that she were a river or a fountain, a mobile *matatu*, rain, a train, a wheelbarrow, a bird, an aeroplane, anything that could move. Anything. For in movement she knew, lay hope.

Invisible connections

Most of the times, the night girls came from little shacks where lice was well knit into the bedding, settling in piles into the dirty hems of old

had to run away from some dangerous encounters as she tried to get what she wanted without selling her body all the time. She could never risk a new scar because her 'husband' would know it was not a scar he caused and he would beat her up to death. She became an expert at hiding scars and dodging men who might injure her in visible places. But some men pinched her in hidden places because she had no clitoris or labia to offer. They had been cut up by an old woman who prepared brides of the gang and who got paid for this and whom the men in the gang praised as the best artist they ever had.

The woman cutter was never incarcerated as the street girls often were. She continued with her cruel job. She mutated like a virus much to the benefit of the men. You might even hear learned grandsons praise her style of mutilation and the benefits it brought on society. You could hear the ridiculous argument that "this as a whole benefits our society!"

But for Wairi, so many men nearly killed her when they found out what her private parts looked like. Some spat on her and asked her why she dared wear make-up if all she had was that; nasty little hole. She always tried to disarm those who were not drunk with a smile without words. Those who were drunk did not know where they were and had no time for such observations. After such nights, after Yaadi left, she slept in her shack until mid- morning. She would then dream she was a panel beaten *matatu* that was always full of passengers but which could not move. She would wake up sweating and wish that she were a river or a fountain, a mobile *matatu*, rain, a train, a wheelbarrow, a bird, an aeroplane, anything that could move. Anything. For in movement she knew, lay hope.

Invisible connections

Most of the times, the night girls came from little shacks where lice was well knit into the bedding, settling in piles into the dirty hems of old

blankets. There were no sheets here, but on the street, the girls rivaled the others through cheaply acquired second hand clothes so popular in Nairobi. Their clothes mattered much to them and indeed they were everything to them. Kenyans, even the ones who had better means like Maya and her Mum, could not do without these *mitumbas* which they also sold to Uganda where they called them *Mivumba*. Owino and Kelrwe market were popular for these goods. In Kenya, Toi and Gikomba were well known. Twenty five years ago, it was Uganda that used to sell new textiles to Kenya. Fifteen years ago, Kenyans traded new things in Uganda, but now, it was only second hand trade going on.

Rika knew that the efforts to revive old and indigenous new textile industries were killed almost forever. She often argued if in the seventies and eighties, before *mitumba* came local textile was already so colorful and beautiful, what would they be now in this millennium? No one thought much about that. Even in the rich countries where some people bought old clothes saying they loved them and were in a lifestyle which allowed them solidarity with the poor, no one thought too much about the impact of this help. The developed world was doing their best in the trade of sending clothes to the poor in Afrika for charity. Rika thought that maybe the cause was lost. Would heavy demand not have made fabrics made in Afrika cheaper? Some of her friends told her to forget this as the second hand clothes made some people in Africa wealthy. They told her she had to forget her Gandhian ideals and her admiration for his weaving of local cloth between his feet. In Kenya, not even a single village produced cardigans for their local school uniforms and yet all children had to buy and wear them.

On the streets of Nairobi, girls were well dressed night and day. The night girls dressed for the rich to see them as clean and touchable. The rich men often left beds that were fit to be thrones to go and 'see' these girls. Rich men bared their bodies before these humble princesses for money. But was it really for money?

Rika often thought that the rich who did this were perhaps telling a story they could never finish. A story which was not as simple as Abunuwasi's fascinating tales or of Arabian Nights taste. A riddle in fact, that was not as plain as the one of why powerful men – judges, priests, popes, wear women's long dresses. It was not as plain as why women did not wear the so called knickers in the middle ages and why men wore- some still do- tunics and stockings. What met the eye was that the poor bared their bodies for slavery. Perhaps as Soujourner Truth said, they had to sell their images, to feed their substance just like the slaves of her time.

Pity filled Rika in deep recesses of her soul that she never knew she possessed. Her compassion run like a river there that not even powers from newly discovered planets could stop them.

Even in the seemingly innocent rising sun of the rural areas, there was someone who had some money to give somebody else, as long as they gave them a little bit of warm and tender flesh. It did not matter if it was soulless and mutilated. To those who bought human flesh compassion was rare. When their so called mercy came, if it did, it was spiked like the fight of a porcupine always ready to shoot arrows and hurt every part of the body and then run. There was no accounting.

Rika recalled how on a visit to her grandmother's rural home in Kairi, a strong middle aged man who drove a handcart full of water in her village once stopped her to ask her if she remembered him. Many years had passed and from her visits to her grandmother in those days she could not pass the test. Then with a smile that made his black eyes shine bright and showed his bright shining teeth, he whistled as he rolled up his dirty sleeves.

"Teeri was my mother," he said.

"Eech?"

"Teeri the round one as they called her, do you not remember her?" he asked smiling even more.

“Oh, yes, I do, and I did hear that she died, pole!” She gushed out.

She remembered that Teeri Fiori as she was called, was the most active prostitute in the village. The difference between her and the city girls is that she did it in her own home where she sold local brew with local women who helped serve the men to their utmost pleasure. Here she did not have to dress up.

Village and even city men felt safe with her because all the men and women of the village were sure of what services they got in her house and from her cheerful big heart. The entire village called her Fiori after the make of the only car that was seen around in the village. She had a wide smile and a loud and warm voice. Even children knew she had a special place for men. What Rika never knew was that this son of Teeri was telling her the riddle of how he was her second cousin.

At exactly 11.15am, a jacketless Rika, in a brown T-shirt with the inscription “*touch of the wild*” walked into the Thorn Tree terrace. Years of interviewing had taught her that arriving earlier than the other party, whether known or unknown is powerful. You set the pace. You observe. When the person you are meeting comes in, there is a gait to watch, confidence and sense of direction and identity. Time was a resource. Its observation varied in the South too. Some in Afrika kept time and others did not. It was not a North -South distinction as so many had tried to say it was, meaning that they thought people in Afrika never kept time all the time.

She chose a table for two in the patio of the Thorn Tree right next to the famous messages on the tree. She noted that the Tree now had a board on it so that its bark would not suffer too much injury. She only realized how appropriate her choice of place was later as the conversation took shape. Under the soft and sweet sun they spoke deeply. Rei had used a strong sunscreen.

A Thorn Tree is Kenya's heart

“Very warm regards from Martel. He has fond memories of you... and asked me to remind you of his best wishes for your work and future!”

“Please be sure he fully understands your dangerous working environment. He said if you thought my work would put you in danger, I could stop or do it in another way...” Rei added.

“Thanks. Yes, he encouraged me a lot. I owe him for that. He is a great man. I really enjoyed his contributions in the Congress discussions!”

“Brilliant!”

“Martel wrote the most wonderful story I ever read. He says he wanted to write the best little book... one that could fit into the palm of anyone's hand. He made me learn how to desire to shrink my country into my heart. We enjoyed that discussion on Facebook.” said Rika.

“Fb. I .. think it is an easy connection but I keep off it for long periods and use it once in a while. On fb, Martel's profile photo is a Rothschild giraffe his friend saw and photographed here at the Lake Nakuru Park.”

“Shrink your country into your heart?” “Ooumphmmm!”

“You find that interesting?”

“Who wouldn't?”

“Hey, this is the message Martel left here on the Thorn Tree four years ago. He left it before I knew him and guided me to it from Dakar when I met him.

To: All writers

From: E.M

My desire is to write you a little book a tiny one, short and intimate, enchanting; a book you can laugh with and for crying with when it is time to laugh and cry.”

“The waiter put Rika's espresso coffee and a nice slice of black forest cake down in the middle of the mat on her part of the table. He

served Rei a cappuccino and a house biscuit. Two bottles of mineral water and glasses were on the table too.

“Actually, talking about places and authors that inspire, The Thorn Tree is a special place.”

“Yes?”

“Very inspiring. It has what I call power of place from historic events. I know you want all you can get on Nairobi first hand! It is here that engineers working on the Nairobi Railway used to sit and rest chatting. They had coffee under this Thorn Tree, after their work at the Railway Station in 1902. The railway builders knew this as the 317 Mile. Nairobi was then a swamp. Many authors you know have sat here and had coffee and written great stories. ‘You sit at The Stanley, and watch the world go by,’ wrote Ernest Hemingway.

“I would imagine that Karen Blixen of Out of Africa fame has been here too?”

“Pity most people only know her film,” said Rika.

“I have read some her books.”

“Yes, and many other famous people of course have been here. Film stars from all over the world, Bollywood and Hollywood included. I hope you know about Nollywood. That one is about to rock the world crazy!” Said Rika. “Elspheth Huxley, of the *Flame Trees of Thika*, was also here,” She added.

“What an amazing place!” Rei exclaimed.

“Hope you have time to see the Karen Blixen Museum, out there in Karen. A most moving story,” Said Rika.

“I have watched Out of Africa. I know of her love letters as well. I would love to find time to see the museum!”

“Philip Ochieng, a famous Kenyan author and columnist sits here from time to time. We had lunch here the other day. Not quite the haunt of our famous writers, say Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and Ngugi wa Thiong’o. They are in touch with our realities in another way. It certainly would have been atypical for the late Wahome Mutahi. His

‘watering holes’ as he called places where he and his friends drunk could be said to be the other end of the spectrum from here. Of course all these writers may have passed by and even had coffee or a meal, but...this is not an ordinary haunt for most.

“Yes, I can understand. Some places are central in another sense. I have read quite a few young writers these days... like you said, there is a vibrant awakening in poetry and prose too.”

“It has never been about lack of writing or writers. It is always about... publishers...”

“Sure. I know. It is the same everywhere.”

“You have an idea how interesting Kenya’s history is and that is why you are here. The tendency to divide along racial and ethnic lines is not new. It is compounded these days with religious differences, just like in the rest of the world. “

“ I see. True, sad. It is all about the world, not just Afrika!” said Rei.

“I know that the coolies – the Indians who made the railway did not come here to rest; this was a white man’s place. Kenya almost adopted apartheid. It was a quick and lucky move that managed to thwart discrimination becoming law. But like in many other places, discrimination can be very subtle, it is an unwritten law in many parts of the world. There is racism within every race in the world, people of the same race find differences to react to negatively also within their own race. Human beings behave like ants or bees feeling only completely comfortable in their groups. Different Kenyan groups see each other as friends, and others as enemies, or let’s say competitors and they have to be reminded to work as a national team!” Explained Rika.

“The beauty of Kenya is that she has power to transform herself from negative threats to embracing the positive power in her. This needs to be done by all, the people and the powerful.”

“The powerful need to be convinced most about the need for change,” Rika observed, looking rather serious.

“I agree, No one can lead alone!”

“I was shocked to overhear a young lawyer insult his Kenyan colleague outside the Nairobi Law Courts calling him ‘You Kuli!’ It is personal attitudes that really need to change. I think Kenya holds up a challenging difference to the world. Many problems but determination and cheerfulness in spite of all the trials...Foreign influence in the country’s problems is downplayed.”

“I read about Kenyans described as one of the world’s most optimistic people still!”

“The struggle for freedom was won and that planted a seed of hope forever; that is the seed that all Kenyans must claim and share! We are on Kimathi Street. If you look up to the corner there to the left and almost in the middle of the street, from the kerb, you can see his statue. He was hanged by the Brits for his indomitable spirit.”

“His story is one great movie!”

“Yes, but you must see and listen to Afrika and not just dream movies, our lives are constant movies! But I agree. I still look forward to seeing *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* on big screen!”

“I know, the temptation to see the world as movies is big!”

“Oh, yeah, the last King of Scotland, Out of Africa and Invi...” Rei said, and before he could finish Rika went on passionately. She rarely interrupted conversation but it seemed she could not wait.

“Across to our left on the upper side, “ She said pointing, “is Jomo Kenyatta Avenue. Kenyans were taught that he, Kenyatta, was the main hero of freedom and in the process we ignored so many others.”

“I have an idea about that, but you know more.”

“Some in Kenya do not know about Koitalel arap Somoei and his terrible killing by Col. Richard Meinertzhagen, a British man. Koitalel, a resistance chief arrived in a meeting in a place now called Nandi Bear Club in Nandi Hills, and when he went to shake the Colonel’s hand, he shot him dead. Some people even say he went on to behead him as the King’s African Rifles soldiers killed their own brothers. Koitalel had

fought guerilla wars with his 8 000 Nandi soldiers against colonial British to stop the building of the “Lunatic Express!”

“Oh!”

“It happened on 19th October 1905. Today, we celebrate Kenyatta Day on the 20th of October, which soon we shall re-name Heroes Day. We have so many heroes!”

“That is proposed in the New Constitution. I read it.”

“Important objects of Koitalel’s royal regalia, three sticks went missing, they were found in 2006 in Shrewsbury.”

“Where is that? Who found them? How did this happen?”

“It is in the county of Shropshire in the West Midlands region of England. It lies on the River Severn. Kimnyango Seroney, a Kenyan student and Kenyan Egyptologist Kipkoech Sambu called attention to rods’ importance when they found. Meinertzhagen’s son, Randle, brought them back to Kenya the same year they were found. The three artifacts taken were a long rod ending in a V representing religious kingship, a club signifying military power, and a staff like a walking stick which means right of kingship. Kenyans and especially the Nandi people had never seen them!”

“There is a British Museum lending a Kenyan gallery some hundreds of artifacts taken from Kenya in colonial times to display for a few days.”

“Crazy! They still have not returned Koitalel’s lion skin headgear and his shoes and about 10 000 other items!

It was an exciting day when the royal sticks were returned. They were cleansed in a ceremony and sanctified again. This for the elders means one day the blood of the 23 soldiers who were killed immediately after Koitalel and the 2 000 soldiers will be compensated one day.”

“I know of Richard Meinertzhagen. He went on to become an ornithologist and had invented a fake bird he called the Meinertzhagen warbler in Morocco! During the First World War, he served in other parts of Africa, India and Palestine where he fought with Lawrence of Arabia! They should find out what is missing there!”

“Good idea!”

“After the war, he was involved in the creation of the Palestine Mandate, which eventually led to the creation of the state of Israel.”

“Even if we will only concentrate on Kenya, more reports are needed everywhere. The media abroad did not understand the Kenyan event. They wrote about the return of some simple sticks! People were wondering what all this fuss was about.”

“Yes, I read some items. Thousands of cheering Kenyans packed a town centre to welcome home three wooden sticks symbolising tribal leadership that were stolen by a British Army officer in 1905. Isn’t the history of European presence in Africa just horrifying? Have you heard of the Herero genocide in Namibia?”

“I watched *A hundred years of Silence* the other day. It was the first statement I have seen on the matter. Whenever a nation can face its past, its present is no problem because it is, its past,” Said Rei. He stared in one spot.

“But we are divided even in victory here. It seems as if disunity is our inheritance. Koitalel’s resistance must be celebrated for example in rural Nyeri, before we can call ourselves a nation. He is hardly part of our capital where every big person seeks to have a signature or is given one. It makes sense that he should be remembered more!” Said Rika.

“And are there women heroes?” Asked Rei.

“Always a raw deal? There is a street you drive along named after Harry Thuku but none commemorates Mary Nyanjiru who fought for his release and therefore, Kenya’s freedom from the colonial yoke back in 1922. She must have slipped down the ‘slip road’ of our memory I usually say to myself! Me Katilili wa Menza who almost crossed this country on foot to unite us against colonial masters is forgotten; not even a village path is named after her. I would have thought since The University of Nairobi campus is so close to the grounds where Nyanjiru was shot dead, the so called ‘multi purpose’ should have been named Me Katilili and Nyanjiru Hall!”

“Agreed!” Exclaimed Rei.

“Clever divide and rule tactics still haunt present day Kenya. The colonialists hungry for power and the best land of Kenya which they called ‘the White Highlands’ made the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru almost the centre of a nation that holds more than a hundred other ethnic groups!” Added Rika. “Operation Anvil against them in Nairobi set many tribes apart. The politicians that took over did not heal that early enough.”

“What you say makes sense.”

“You can imagine the deep seated tensions that generated. Right up to the present moment there are cracks that seem to beckon a volcanic eruption. Neighbor is set against neighbor!”

“I can well see that! Some say this is a tired argument, they call it the blame the colonialist and go scot -free argument.”

“Some of the other ethnic groups are completely unknown as Kenya officially recognizes only forty two groups!”

“From what I heard from the cab driver, Fundi, the names: Kimathi, Muindi Mbingu and Jeevanjee Gardens, Moi Avenue and others sing the history of Kenya. Fundi shared freely with me. You know I arrived into the early morning demonstration by women from Nanyuki.

“That was a small one. You should have seen what happened back in 2003, when the women first came to town! But you will not find photos of that demo easily even on internet. You will find many articles on how prostitutes lied.”

“Fundi, showed me almost all the main historic streets as we evaded driving into the demonstration. All hope is not lost. Fundi knows the history of Kenya very well. I was shocked to hear the accusations of rape by British soldiers over the years in Nanyuki. But again, I was not really shocked!”

“Fran Nyar a journalist follows this closely but he is threatened. They say some of them lie, but three men stretching a woman out and...”

“It goes like this: Governments. Power. Armies= RAPE. Gangs, power, money, = RAPE.”

“How can someone argue in earnest that the women were just prostitutes.

“And a British soldier who sees a prostitute..., well, that is their choice.”

“I was flabbergasted to hear that they had never been tried. It was devastating to see women with children for proof on the road. It was disheartening to see mothers with their children whom they said were children of rape. I thought about this for a long time after Fundi drove me to The Gama Hotel, yes I remember Harry Thuku Road.”

Rei looked at his little map as a flash of thought reminded him how exciting it was that he was actually sitting face to face with Rika.

Before going on with the story of the Thorn Tree, Rika showed Rei the famous old painting of the East African Railway marked 5918 on the wall.

“Amazing!” he exclaimed.

“But more interesting is actually the Thorn Tree itself which has been preserved over the years. The first one grew old, leaned on the building and had to be cut. We planted the second generation one and this is the third generation tree. Each time a new tree is planted, a Time Capsule is buried in its roots. The Time Capsule in there now was re-buried in 1998 by students of St. Christopher School, Nairobi after it was unearthed from the roots of the Thorn tree that had to be felled.”

The Time Capsule somewhat reminded Rei of “A Captive of Time.” It was clear that this visit filled him with expectations. He was sort of conscious of some inner workings which he could not explain.

“Of course many dignitaries have been here. Kofi Annan and Graca Machel were here many times. I hope to have coffee with Martel here again, someday,” Said Rika.

“I am sure you will. He sounded quite eager to return. He almost came with me. He hopes you can guide me to do some interviews on

Kenya, and that you would even be kind enough to visit a few places with me, right?"

Rika was still thinking and she went on talking freely. Rei respected her space.

"I hope too that the Time Capsule will one day be buried by students from Turkana and Marsabit! How do you find Nairobi? Where else have you been to in Africa?"

"I am very interested in Kenya. It is a little early to say more but we shall see. I have been to Senegal and Egypt. I think Nairobi has a lot of character!"

"What do you mean? Nairobi or Kenya?"

"Both, actually. The thing about Nairobi is that you feel you know her very fast and that she is friendly. She seems to say, 'You get what you see, but am capable of surprises! She is entirely mysterious once you look past the stereotype of the "green city in the sun" fame!"

"Is that the same way you feel about Kenya too?"

"Oh yes. Kenya has this magic about her. She is powerful. Some hidden surprises too. Again she is mysterious, once you look past the island of peace fame! She beckons visitors, calls you from a far. It's all in her name –Kenya! It seems to call one who reads it or hears it. That is what I think."

"That is funny as most people do not agree on the origin of her name!"

"Have you heard Roger Whittaker's *'My Land is Kenya'* and other songs of his like the one on the prison in south east Kenya called *'Shimoni'*, which means in the hole, I suppose a deep one?"

"No I have not, but then, perhaps he never visited Rwanda?"

"What do you mean? Do you understand Rwanda?"

"Well. A friend told me about Rwanda. Not been there. But about the songs?"

"They are old beautiful songs. He sings of the good old EAR & H, meaning the East African Railways and Harbors then. He used to go to

school by train. I have his music and can get you a CD if you would like one."

"Thanks. I would be very grateful."

"What would one say about a train like that in a song?"

"Oh, you will hear him!" he sings, 'Nobody else had a train quite as fine as mine, good old EAR & H!' There is a video. And thousands of videos by other local singers always declaring their love for Kenya!"

Rika's information flow was as sweet and captivating as the sun.

Rei leaned towards her and listened carefully. The whole of Nairobi seemed to be almost in the palm of his hand in twenty minutes.

He knew he could not fit in the slums that easily. Kenya and Nairobi, always facing the disturbing challenge of the great divide of inequalities that evade the sense of the '*hakuna matata*' type, which seems to long to crown all Kenya. When you hear Eric's music you will hear the merging of this beauty and passionate love for Kenya."

"You must mean Wainaina? I met him briefly in London. I wished he had sang for Mandela... he and Oliver Mtukudzi from Zimbabwe. Powerful singing!"

"How long are you here?" Rika asked.

"I am only here for seven days. I must make the best of them. I have read many things about Kenya. We share passion for this country. I must listen to Kenyan music but that I can do at home."

"Seven days! Well, what do you intend to do? Fly around?"

"How much time can you make to work with me in the week?"

"You are lucky am off duty from tomorrow after 10am for the next two weeks and school is still on. My children, Uhai and Hariri, will be at school. We love to be off together but not this time. But what do you wish to do in the days you are here? I gave Martel my word to help you and I want to keep it. I respect Martel very much and therefore, you, his friend must get my best attention."

"I will not have the time to do anything such as going to see a lioness bringing up an oryx for sure! That is over until the good old

lioness decides to adopt another oryx, I understand she has done it six times! “ Said Rei.

“Isn’t that wonderful!” exclaimed Rika.

“I know I can sneak into the Nairobi National Park any evening.”

“Sure. Fundi can take you any day you wish,” said Rika.

“I am intending to listen to and understand other things. But you know that I have just got a phone call on my way here from Martel who tells me there is an offer for us on a chopper from his friend Nig born in Kenya and of English and German descent! He lives near the Karen Blixen Museum and he is flying around this week taking aerial shots!” Said Rei excitedly.

“Just like Martel, no wonder we elected him Association President,” Said Rika.

“That is exciting. What then?”

“I was just wondering,” he added in a subdued tone, “about this mili-gang I hear about. It looks to me like the formation of something that might determine many things in the future. Who are these people? What is being done about their plight and all that? I hear they are now making money. Does anyone fund them? How are they connected to politics?” He finished almost out of breath.

“Wow! That is a big one and not going to be easy for you! Or anyone for that matter!”

“Well, it is really what intrigues me, Rika. And in these seven days, am going to have to connect flying around and keeping my ear to the ground. I am really keen on getting to the bottom of this thing. Also, It seems to me like this is the real voice of Afrika that we need to listen to. I have not met Nig and I know how far from these things his type of Kenya is. I have spoken to him and he does not mind us but he warns, no politics. ‘Just view from above, enjoy my photographs , rides and go home,’ he said to me in a rather patronizing way.

“I understand him.”

“Before I came here, I read an article in which Graca Machel Mandela was asking that Afrika be voiced as Afrika is!”

“Yes, I know what she means.”

“That is my main interest. I know you must help me to disguise it with all that flying around. I am going to work 24/8, if you get what I mean! I will need you to go through my plan and change things around to suit you. The slums?”

“Risky with the motive you have. They, I mean most of the gangs there in the slums can sniff you out like tobacco, which they love!”

“Rika, our other name as you well know is “Risk!”. I would love to see a village that was a reserve in the colonial times and I understand there are some past a place called Paradise Lost on the way to Kiambu town and that it has some hidden caves. I read there are more caves near Turkana. I love caves. Kenya, they say was the cradle of humankind. The caves near Lake Turkana? We can go over there Tuesday afternoon with Nig. He is flying from noon to six. This is the only chance I have for a real view of the Rift Valley. We can visit the caves in Turkana!”

“I suggest that we meet at 4pm today as I now must go back to the office and clean some copy, before 3pm. I also think that we should meet in a more private place. This is an eavesdropper’s paradise. Besides, anyone walks into this place any time and am well known here. Your main interest is only whispered here or simply never mentioned- the gang! We call it the Sabasaba Defence Force! I tried to investigate it and the editor stopped me. I am very keen on it. I even have dreams about it. I will tell you about the dream of the seven gates and an interesting woman. I was invited for a visit when I kept on toying with the idea of writing more deeply about these militias. How did the Big Man know my intentions? When I met him, all his motives for my invitation were covert. I know how to protect you at our own risk, remember! Finally it is as much truth as we can get that will help us out; it does not matter who gets to the truth. Not their color of skin or indeed tribe! When we meet, I will tell you what it will take *you* to do a good job. I believe I will have thought of ways out, alright? And we will succeed. And by the way, flying around Kenya is just my thing, especially all in a few hours!” Rika said smiling.

“That is great Rika! *and that* is very kind of you! I do hope that this will not be too much, taking away the break you were looking forward to?”

“What wouldn’t I do for Martel and his friends? I had an inkling this kind of need would come up. When I say Martel inspires me, I mean he keeps me working and dreaming. Things have been very hard. Read his little story someday!”

“See you then. I will stay here and look around a little bit. This is a historical hotel in the city, like the Norfolk. I am more curious now about this place Nairobi!”

“Every bit of Nairobi is historical, Rei!”

Rika yawned freely. Next time she would tell him of the different names she had for local hotels. Rei had a mischievous smile and certainly an interesting mind. She studied his face like a book behind the glass of a shelf. For now, she could only scan him. His wide forehead and searching eyes announced that he connected easily if you were ready and willing to delve into things with him. His nose had a visibly sensitive tip and was red in the sun. It reminded Rika of the myriad local jokes about how some Caucasians keep their nose out of the cup when drinking tea or coffee. These jokes were very popular in the villages where Caucasians were a rare sight.

Humans fascinate one another with their differences when they are at their best, at their worst they use the same differences to discriminate, fight and even kill. Rei had a good antenna; he knew that Rika was carried away with thoughts and he did not interrupt her. She had moments of distance for a purpose. She was fond of deep interrogation of herself and life. But Rika felt a little shaken from her usual certainty on how far to let men invade her space. She liked travelling, but independently. Now, here she was bound to this writer for a week! She was surprised at herself. It was no longer just an obligation to Martel. She was enjoying this!

Parallel degrees and a treebook

As she stepped out onto the pavement on Kimathi Street, two men both in corduroy trousers of the same beige color and green khaki shirts stopped right in front of her. At first they seemed to stop still, almost get paralysed simultaneously. Then they both took three steps back and fell on their knees. Rika was not looking at a TV screen. They bowed their heads in unison till their foreheads almost touched the ground. The street was silent and Rika was utterly surprised. Her mind quickly dashed to the men in scripture who fell before Christ after asking him who he was and taking steps backwards. But this was Nairobi, the city in the sun, and she could see well. Chink, chink, went a familiar double click of a camera. But now, everyone was paralysed too, with fear. Something made her realize she could not call out or turn her head in another direction. This awareness was instinctive. The sound of many cameras clicked again. That was the only sound that seemed to be allowed and like the lonely cry of a wagtail bird invading a lonely afternoon it came and went. For one strange moment, even the traffic and all noises lapsed into silence. Everything came to a silent standstill. Was this the silent noon of self realization? The tension built up fast.

Tension transformed everything. The sounds of the clicking cameras turned into the sound of clashing machetes. Rika suddenly saw a woman in blue standing in front of her. She looked cool and isolated but loving and compassionate. This was someone she had never seen before. Rika stared at her as the woman held up a recording mobile phone camera. She expected a bullet to ring through the silent air and lodge in this nun-like fleshy woman with a brilliant and shining face. No shot rang, no change happened. Still there was tension in the air and it was rising like a high mountain.

It was at this point that Rika came face to face with the only person that was standing and walking freely. It was a smartly dressed and well known Leader of the militia who had for a few weeks denounced the

gang becoming a choir leader only to abandon the choir again. She knew him. She did not know if he recognized her. After he passed, the men in corduroy rose up and began to walk again. The Leader walked with an air of confidence. His clean swept face was clear of all doubts. He gave the impression that he was alive to each minute of his life in a very deliberated way. He was sharp in focus. He had a mission.

Rika crossed the road and went back to her office. She knew as she applied a little hand cream to her shaking hands, that this had been no dream. She pressed the tips of her fingers against one another and made a wide fan like shape with them. Her elbows on the table, her fingers touched her nose. She looked down at her chest and saw her heart beat raising her top gently up and down. All that had happened in broad daylight. The cops had stood there in motionless and in utter silence. You could not arrest humans for worshipping or revering whom they chose to, she supposed.

The next day, the national police uniform was changed. They would not wear green anymore but brown suits and skirts. The power of the Sabasaba Defence Force was real and it had possessed and stilled that main street for those seconds; like it had done to the country. No color change could reverse that. Would Sabasaba Defence Force someday paralyse all of Nairobi and hold all at ransom, she wondered?

Mystery and power were embedded in all the gang did. Rika thought how their burial ceremonies which were like no other, straddled between Christian burial and the traditional ways. Burial of bodies instilled fear and mystery at a time when most humans felt quite vulnerable.

As the corpse lay there in a casket that only they could touch, their own home made incense went up from a locally made burner placed in the hole dug for the casket. The casket was installed into the wall at the bottom of the hole as if in a shelf. Church leaders, chiefs and police shrunk back in horror. People mastered and baffled by mystery can be taken anywhere. Colorful headscarves covering women's heads could

be seen moving up the hills and village paths as if those whom they covered were absent or had become windy spirits beneath the cloths that took different shapes. Women were seen scattering up the hills and village paths as the burial went on; with headscarves covering their hearts and brains.

No Christian priest or preacher was allowed to speak at the funerals but they could show up like any other mourner. Some church leaders recoiled in horror as did their followers. The gang members felt triumphant. They showed that they cared for none of the teachings of the mainstream churches and they were proud of their own religion.

Church leaders shunned the gang and this left a gap which made the mysterious solidarity bond of the group grow even more. In the meantime, even the villagers refused to name the gang saying they would be killed. They all signed a pact of silence in their hearts, quietly, fearfully; without a pen, without a hand, but within their hearts, they put a finger to their lips and sealed them with invisible glue.

Rika felt dazed. She thought about the messages on the plaques near the Thorn Tree and knew that Rei would find them and read them. This thought brought her back to reality but not without deep worry. The gang.

Rei was learning a lot. This third generation Thorn Tree had a plaque stating it was planted by Richard Leakey. Rei had read about the Leakeys, a famous family settled in Kenya many years ago, and their discoveries of old age human fossils in Kenya. Kenyan scientists had discovered fossils of *homo erectus* near Lake Turkana. They had shattered the previous record of old fossils and it was in the news. After sometime, Ethiopians revealed their discovery of an even older fossil. Many countries in Africa wanted to be called the cradle of mankind but none of them wanted to master how to cradle humanity. That would demand certain responsibilities. Was Kenya willing to be counted? Could she nurse if not cradle *Ubuntu*? What had happened to *Utu*? These philosophies placed people as the centre of ones relations with money and other material goods.

Rei ordered another cup of coffee. He stared at his notebook. Rika's warm stories had spell-bound him. He only wanted more of these. He found notes he had made in the past about Kit Mikayi. He had read about this legendary 'mother' rock on the internet. It was said this is where the Luo ancestors stopped to rest on their way from Sudan as they came down the Nile before settling on the shores of Lake Victoria. The figure of a mother holding a baby inspired many stories among the people of Nyanza, and indeed all over the world. Nyanza, he thought, needed a name change. It was the land of those whose voices in their leading sons and daughters who have died for justice; even as the stones peak and speak, telling their story in great mourning. Rei had read about Tom Joseph Mboya and Robert Ouko's murders.

Rei looked up. He stared at the message board anew. He was transported into another world. He noticed that the board was about two square meter, just about the length of his two wide open arms. It held an incredible collection of feelings. He called it a Treebook whose first and last chapter was the human heart. It was a small space on which the world shared feelings. The freshness of messages pinned on the tree was invasive. The idea of the board was new and some messages were hanged directly on the green bark of a protesting tree. Rei thought about the change that had occurred in time; sms and e-mails and admired this old tradition of hand written notes which defied contemporary ways. He had to make notes. He took out his miniature pad and scribbled fast.

The first one was partly in French and partly in English.

To: Olly

From: Amanda

Je suis parti pour toujours. Sit u me cherches no oblieu pas..I am leaving today. Look me up, don't forget...

The next one was *in CAPS* and started with a neat cancellation.

To: GΘΘ- - YOU

From: MAY KAY

JUST MOVED HERE TO THIS LOVELY TOWN. BUT WE NEED SOME FUN PEOPLE TO HANG OUT WITH. ARE YOU IN TOWN? THEN DROP US A LINE.

Rei would have looked them up if there had been a contact left but mysterious 'You' was meant to know how to reach his friends.

This one in Spanish he found rather amusing, it was not addressed to anyone in particular:

"Solo decir que esperamos volver a este maravilloso pais. Amabilidad, Buena gente, bellos paisajes, espantosas carreteras! " I love Kenia!"

Luis y Rocio Espana

Just to say that we hope to be back to this marvelous country. Loving and good people, beautiful countryside, terrible roads! – I love Kenya. (Luis y Rocio, Espana.)

It is the "*espanto or disgust*" part that he loved! So Spanish: here was a people who will never hide their strong feelings. He almost spoke loudly to himself so cheered by Spanish humor.

Some students from Newcastle and from Oxford had also left messages for their colleagues. Rei went on to read some others including this Italian one: TO: "*Le nostra strategista preferite*

From: *Gli uomini in crisi*

"Gusto kenia a la da strusato da morire... fatevi sentire. Ci revidiamo in Italia" 16/07/07 (From humans (men) in crisis... Kenya loved to the point of death, it makes you feel... see you in Italia.)

Dan San wrote, first trying Kiswahili:

To:Everyone

From: Me

Jambo!

mzuri, hopefully

Have fun the rest of your time in Kenya. It will be over before you know it."

Rei smiled.

Anyone putting up a private message here was tossing it to the world. Here was an open heart on a Thorn Tree. It was a tree that opened hearts and took messages and locked them up in its sap.

From: *Lukiimam*

To: Kui, Maya, Ivy, Sarah, Sugar, Beer Bottles, Maya's Mum, Boi, Lynn, Sweetie,

We are yours. We will marry you all and you will live in castles!

Almost everywhere in Kenya, you can see a Thorn Tree in dry and not so dry areas. For Rei, the tree spoke of hard won freedom, growing everywhere it grew wherever it willed, despite resistance. May be all the thorn trees in Kenya carry through their roots messages to ancestors? Then the message that Rei read last. It was a short poem that moved him deeply. It was to a father now gone beyond the reach of the hand his little boy testimony's to good fatherhood.

"I still remember you dad for good
you brought me up.
You took me to school,
then you went away.

God loved you so much,
You rested on March 7.
We 'keep' you on the soil,
we remember you,
please we do.
I sing for you,
Your son.

Rei thought of the place in the soil that was now daddy's home. He remembered the loss of the human touch so well described in *A Captive*

of Time. Again and again, he wondered about the Time Capsule of Kenya. He wondered if Kenya would take care of all the little children in the dire loneliness that only orphans know and can tell about. Kenya needed to care urgently. She did not have just one orphan! They were in hundreds of thousands due to Aids related deaths.

Song of the baby

The soap suds were big toward the end of the big blue bath in which Hariri sat. Her little legs opened up innocently where the basin curved and she enjoyed her bath. The soap suds became smaller in balloon of layered bubbles that made the warm water fun to play with. Hariri pushed her little hands down into the basin full of lovely warm water. She moved her palms back and made airy frothy suds cover her up to her waist. Some of the suds flew up into the air and she blew them with her breath. Her mother's hand cupped in the middle got water without suds up and over Hariri's little body. The child responded with happy laughs. Hariri loved her bath. Her mother felt relaxed too with her child's joy, but her feet were tired and she longed for her own bath.

Sings a little baby, my mother's hand is here nothing can go wrong. Little child of Mama's nothing can go wrong with Mama's heart close to mine. She may be far, she may be near but for Mama and I it is always clear, we must not give way to fear. Fear I know none, if Mama is at my side. I cry, Mama. I eat Mama, she is my hope. When Mama gives me a banana; I know my Mama loves me. I might cry as I eat my matoke; but Mama is always love for me, my hot bath Mama is forever, our love never ends! That is what Hariri and Uhai thought about when they heard the word Mama. Warm moments, fun and happiness. She always there for them. First memories took over any other pains caused by absences due to work. Rika had set a good foundation. Her children would always trust her.

of Time. Again and again, he wondered about the Time Capsule of Kenya. He wondered if Kenya would take care of all the little children in the dire loneliness that only orphans know and can tell about. Kenya needed to care urgently. She did not have just one orphan! They were in hundreds of thousands due to Aids related deaths.

Song of the baby

The soap suds were big toward the end of the big blue bath in which Hariri sat. Her little legs opened up innocently where the basin curved and she enjoyed her bath. The soap suds became smaller in balloon of layered bubbles that made the warm water fun to play with. Hariri pushed her little hands down into the basin full of lovely warm water. She moved her palms back and made airy frothy suds cover her up to her waist. Some of the suds flew up into the air and she blew them with her breath. Her mother's hand cupped in the middle got water without suds up and over Hariri's little body. The child responded with happy laughs. Hariri loved her bath. Her mother felt relaxed too with her child's joy, but her feet were tired and she longed for her own bath.

Sings a little baby, my mother's hand is here nothing can go wrong. Little child of Mama's nothing can go wrong with Mama's heart close to mine. She may be far, she may be near but for Mama and I it is always clear, we must not give way to fear. Fear I know none, if Mama is at my side. I cry, Mama. I eat Mama, she is my hope. When Mama gives me a banana; I know my Mama loves me. I might cry as I eat my matoke; but Mama is always love for me, my hot bath Mama is forever, our love never ends! That is what Hariri and Uhai thought about when they heard the word Mama. Warm moments, fun and happiness. She always there for them. First memories took over any other pains caused by absences due to work. Rika had set a good foundation. Her children would always trust her.

There were times when hearing her name, a man would turn his head remembering her articles. “By Rika Bukenya!” People remembered her by -lines. She had written long enough for recognition but promotions in the office went to her male colleagues. It is as if managing bathing at home and cooking occasionally disqualified her from management levels in the office. As if she could never be the Managing Editor (me). If she put her mind to it, she would get it, but she was a happy and freer person as a respected writer.

Rei walked right down to the statue of Kimathi, the freedom defender whose letter about his family’s survival and that of his country and the struggle after he was hanged he had read over and over again with deep empathy. He was touched by the strength of the will of a man about to be hanged and who thinks not about himself but of the freedom of his country, his family and friends; the people he would leave behind.

The statue, not liked for its small size by some, gave the impression that this was a man ever in motion; still defending the freedom of his people. He still had his weapons and his hard boots on. Even his hair locked movement in its long dreadlocks. Maybe he was marching with his enemies still at his heels slowing down the freedom of Kenyan people. Nothing was achieved yet then. Vigilance for freedom was still the price to be paid. Kenyatta University art students had produced this statue. Rei read the plaque from the rails that surrounded the statue. “Dedan Wachiuri Kimathi- it is better to die fighting than on our knees begging colonial rule.” These were words tearing through centuries and civilizations from the South to the South and finally to the North. These words were not supposed to be frozen here on a plaque but passed on from generation to generation. Rei wondered if Kimathi’s remains were buried at the Freedom Corner of Uhuru Park; but he had not heard of a heroes’ corner in the city. Kenyatta’s mausoleum stood alone. Later he was to learn that Kimathi’s remains were never found for a dignified burial. Rika told him she had met his widow and children. They, like

many Kenyans were not yet celebrating freedom in independence. Rika last saw them being sent away during the celebrations of independence since they had not received a special guest invitation and the park was full.

On Mama Ngina Street many held their chins that day. Nairobi city centre life was so different from the life in Nanyuki and so distinct from life in Mathare and Kibera. The two snakes still danced away. This was indeed the land of parallel degrees.

Fleas and jiggers

None of the people who kept Wairi busy at night ever rang her during the day or even sent her an sms. The cold bit into her body now as she lay on a straw rag in her room. She bit her lips. She felt fleas biting her flesh in her legs and arms. Her mind was being broken by searing thoughts. The floor she lay on was hard and painful. There were these bugs that bit harder each time, jumping here from there. When their bite just caused an itch here, they were already there biting here, there and everywhere. Her fingers jumped from one part of the body to another, trying to arrest the itch and always failing. She almost lost her mind, but not like once long ago when she was delirious with malaria. No matter how one felt they needed it, no one could scratch everywhere at the same time unless they had eight hands like the legs of a spider, and even then, that was not guaranteed to work.

Many people did not know the difference between fleas which were biting Wairi now and jiggers. It is said that these are relatives and they have a large base of family members. The most important thing was that they bugs are both parasites and they enjoy eating humans. Sticktight fleas could stay on one as long as jiggers do while other fleas bite and hop off. There were many people who never saw their clean feet without remembering days of torment by the pests in the past. Many had never

many Kenyans were not yet celebrating freedom in independence. Rika last saw them being sent away during the celebrations of independence since they had not received a special guest invitation and the park was full.

On Mama Ngina Street many held their chins that day. Nairobi city centre life was so different from the life in Nanyuki and so distinct from life in Mathare and Kibera. The two snakes still danced away. This was indeed the land of parallel degrees.

Fleas and jiggers

None of the people who kept Wairi busy at night ever rang her during the day or even sent her an sms. The cold bit into her body now as she lay on a straw rag in her room. She bit her lips. She felt fleas biting her flesh in her legs and arms. Her mind was being broken by searing thoughts. The floor she lay on was hard and painful. There were these bugs that bit harder each time, jumping here from there. When their bite just caused an itch here, they were already there biting here, there and everywhere. Her fingers jumped from one part of the body to another, trying to arrest the itch and always failing. She almost lost her mind, but not like once long ago when she was delirious with malaria. No matter how one felt they needed it, no one could scratch everywhere at the same time unless they had eight hands like the legs of a spider, and even then, that was not guaranteed to work.

Many people did not know the difference between fleas which were biting Wairi now and jiggers. It is said that these are relatives and they have a large base of family members. The most important thing was that they bugs are both parasites and they enjoy eating humans. Sticktight fleas could stay on one as long as jiggers do while other fleas bite and hop off. There were many people who never saw their clean feet without remembering days of torment by the pests in the past. Many had never

been bitten by them and they did not know that fleas bite and hop off and that jigger bugs are baby fleas that dig into the flesh and cosy- up in there eating human flesh. Wairi had both jiggers and fleas disturbing her. In the day time, Wairi had removed one jigger with a pin from her index finger. She thought of drinking a little alcohol to beat the chill. But if she had to do this, she would need to go and buy it, that could not be. She could get it with the money she had from the previous night, but surely a neighbor would tell on her to her 'husband'.

The sense of being captured in this shack was overwhelming. These sad thoughts pushed each other in her mind like jiggers. No, it was worse, they tormented her psychologically too. Wairi was usually alone during the day. She was seemingly in company during the night but her mind never rested. She wondered if she would finally contract and eventually have to live with HIV/Aids, perhaps dying of it? Some of her customers already betrayed her refusing to wear condoms and sensing the female condom she wore, they would be furious. Would one of her customers betray her to the gang one day? Would they throw her out of a moving vehicle too on Ngong Hills and leave her there unconscious or dead? It had happened to her friends many times. Or would she be dumped in Nairobi River? Would they ever know what she was really looking for. But why was she worried about the clients? Her 'husband' suddenly pushed the door open at 11 am that morning. He stood before her like an apparition, his eyes red and glaring. People in the area whispered he was a former Kenya policeman whose motto was 'service to all!' He had a way of stealing all the darkness and light in a room. The light filled the room and her little eyes opened like fluttering butterflies against the darkness of the shelter.

"What are you doing sleeping at this time of the day?" he shouted.

"I, I .aiiii..." She stammered. He grabbed something from the top of the little wooden trunk in which he kept his things. He swiftly moved for her and held her so tight she could not move and could hardly breathe.

She could not believe what he was doing now. Using blades he cut into her flesh, her delicate flesh. The blade passed through her upper arms. She shuddered to think where else he would cut next. He wanted soft places. Yes, blades, fine ones into her flesh in parallel lines. There. He chopped the upper parts of both her arms in different designs with razor blades. He slapped her and pounded her on the head.

“You stupid dog! *Ngui!*” he said to her.

“*Mungu wangu!* My God!” She yelled.

He went on. “Keep quiet! Do you have a God? Does God know you? Don’t you know you must behave as the very grass I walk on? You must remain green and soft always waiting for my feet to step on you!”

Wairi was petrified. She expected the worst and was surprised by his next statement.

“You were rude to me this morning when I asked for my special T-shirt. You speak like a broken machete or a pot with a hole... What did your mother ever teach you?” He asked.

By his standards he was being very polite. To be told one spoke like a broken machete or a pot full of holes were traditionally bad insults in Wairi’s mother tongue. Not to daring speak, she knew that she had not been caught on her night business. Something wet trickled into her arm pits. She was bleeding on her upper arms. Her fingers touched blood and sweat in her armpit hair. She consoled herself massaging it lightly. She felt more pain on her shoulders.

An intense pain shot through her chest ending on her left breast. It was the breast Yaadi had attempted to cut the last time. The breast he had sworn he would someday chop up. She felt very tense and tired. the massage did not help. She knew that her role was to take pain without a word even if it meant her death. If she had dared cry out, all the people who would have come to their house would only have jeered, they would be people who agreed that she was getting a punishment she deserved. They were part of the cultic militia. Their coming would

not be for her rescue but to celebrate her death sentence. They would have killed her as a group of believers getting rid of the bearer of evil or the evil one. The moment they would see her cuts on her upper arms, they would know she had only committed what they called petty crime. Something like forgetting where a handkerchief that was needed by the man of the house was, earned such a punishment. She, just like other women felt the power of the cult over them, but their voices were muted.

Everybody watched the dance of the two snakes in different ways at different times. It was never too clear who was watching it when. In the dark places of the city, many people were not aware of the glitter of the dance that had stolen all other dances. Once the dance took over, no voices were heard except some special and rebellious songs that used music in a unique way. Some poets could hide their voices inside one word which gave birth to all words which people listened to. Life went on as if nothing was really happening.

If her neighbors would have come, they would just have nodded and left him to carry on with the few slaps he was allowed, after cutting her upper arms. Gang members knew exactly where to stop in punishing a bride for one 'crime' or the other. If they had found her lying down with her clothes off, then they too would have known what she had done and why she was being punished.

As for Wairi, in this instance she was like a wounded wild animal that realized faking death and defeat was the only way out. She had seen even little spiders survive the day by folding up and rolling into a little ball. She knew this game very well. She knew the cost. She knew her prison better than anyone else. She knew her refuge did not at this time, lie in going to share her pain with other women. Women had lost the nest in which they used to share pains for relief. Silence seemed safest. She made her escape into silence. She was glad that he had not caught her going out. He would have killed her. She continued to leave her house very quietly when neighbors went to sleep. Everyone was afraid of opening their little holes for windows and of checking what

was going on outside once darkness set and the hour went past nine. One day, she thought, she would leave and never return.

What good were neighbors since the fame of the Good Samaritan? Death haunted all parts of the slums, which neighbor was going to be with all the dying?

Christians neighbours? They too fought over petty things. They would not consider her case a great deal.

Where railway lines end

When he reached his room at The Gama , Rei went through some newspapers and magazines. He felt tired. He wanted to lie down but he went on to answer e-mails briefly.

The dailies always carried shocking features and today was no exception; a cop shot his wife and children before killing himself. It was a common story in Kenya, he learned. What was disturbing was that the article referred to another five recent and similar cases. All these stories included a policeman shooting his wife dead and then shooting himself before anyone could reach him. The article tried to search the deep motives for such behavior and came up with frustrations in housing and poor salaries. Strange love triangles happened between police who had little rooms for houses. They did not live their lives, they had to survive life.

In this last case and others, there was always the question of if the policeman had discovered he was HIV/Positive. But so many people lived with and knew how to deal with a positive HIV/status. Why was their frustration so deep? Compounded stress leading to insanity? But perhaps it was very simple. How was it like to know one could not eat a balanced diet and that one had the virus? What courage did it take to foresee one's own children slipping into becoming orphans? Could everyone summon such courage? What was it like to see one's mother

was going on outside once darkness set and the hour went past nine. One day, she thought, she would leave and never return.

What good were neighbors since the fame of the Good Samaritan? Death haunted all parts of the slums, which neighbor was going to be with all the dying?

Christians neighbours? They too fought over petty things. They would not consider her case a great deal.

Where railway lines end

When he reached his room at The Gama , Rei went through some newspapers and magazines. He felt tired. He wanted to lie down but he went on to answer e-mails briefly.

The dailies always carried shocking features and today was no exception; a cop shot his wife and children before killing himself. It was a common story in Kenya, he learned. What was disturbing was that the article referred to another five recent and similar cases. All these stories included a policeman shooting his wife dead and then shooting himself before anyone could reach him. The article tried to search the deep motives for such behavior and came up with frustrations in housing and poor salaries. Strange love triangles happened between police who had little rooms for houses. They did not live their lives, they had to survive life.

In this last case and others, there was always the question of if the policeman had discovered he was HIV/Positive. But so many people lived with and knew how to deal with a positive HIV/status. Why was their frustration so deep? Compounded stress leading to insanity? But perhaps it was very simple. How was it like to know one could not eat a balanced diet and that one had the virus? What courage did it take to foresee one's own children slipping into becoming orphans? Could everyone summon such courage? What was it like to see one's mother

and closest relations stigmatize one like everyone else? How was it to know one's wife had HIV and was pregnant and the life of the child in danger? Rika sometimes imagined what life would have been for the whole world if HIV/Aids had not visited the earth.

Rei read about many young cops who were said to have been murdered by the gang that prayed facing Mount Kenya. Taking in some dimensions of the Kenyan 'socio- economic freedom' from the description of the life of the cop who had killed himself was enough to show Rei that life under certain conditions was hardly possible.

The soldier was as overburdened as the donkey that Rika had often seen. He was looking after some orphans, he was helping educate all his four sisters' children. They were all single mums. He was looking after his elderly parents too. He had so many responsibilities and very few options.

Rei thought about the paintings at the Stanley. The story of many Kenyans ended the way the railway lines ended in Nanyuki, so abruptly. No ceremony. Just an end; the end that was not like the end of a story as it is told; a dead end. Was the end of colonialism and the start of independence, a great end for Kenya? Nanyuki was closer to the Northern dry areas than to the agricultural and productive highland areas of Kenya. Perhaps the railway in Nanyuki should have traversed all the way to the dry North. Perhaps then, this soldier might have taken the train and gone beyond Nanyuki to see something new before taking his life. What was stifling Kenya? Nanyuki was the end of the railway and the base of all British soldiers still training in Kenya. Nanyuki was the town that demonstrated in Nairobi to show its own face. Nanyuki travelling to catch the eye of the media which was not in its own towns and villages. The people Rei saw demonstrating against Rape. But rape revealed so many things. Entire nations and histories were still entangled in a forceful taking of what did not belong to them. The dance of the snakes continued. This was the greater rape. People had stopped seeing it with the 'death' of communism.

Rei suddenly found himself face to face with a man in the little garden outside the dining room. The young man had eyes that shone and penetrated solids as if with X-radiation. Rei felt suddenly summoned to meticulous attention and serious cross examination. He felt as if his brain was on a weighing scale. He stared at this man whose hair locks were impossible to look past. His eyes magnetized and hypnotized Rei's memory minute by minute. He knew these eyes would hang in his memory forever. The man was jovial and friendly even to a stranger. His face was bright kind and inviting. He smiled. He had a string of truths to say about Kenya. He stared into Rei's eyes as if to tell him that his own eyes had seen everything Rei could possibly be looking for. The man's own eyes scanned all round energetically. It was as if they tried to live in him but found themselves homeless in this poet and a lecturer from The University of Nairobi. He was sitting there waiting for a workshop. It was as if his eyes run in and out of his heart begging their owner not to blast the West, slavery, corruption, imperialism in the one man who stood before his eyes now. That the man knew would be unjust.

"My name is Watu!" he boomed.

"Rei," said a thin and shaky voice.

Rei could sense this man's strength in his look and body. His energy was not for himself. His dammed energy threatened to break something. The walls of the dams of pretence were broken and all barriers swept away in his youthful soul. Was he a man or an entire people? Did he carry all their dashed hopes in his hair? Was he an entire nation rearing to live? Watu told Rei that one day he would build his own railway line by hand stretch it out from Nanyuki and coil it around the dry North Eastern zones. He told him about Mugo wa Kibiru a prophet of yore who had foretold the coming of the railway line calling it the "iron snake". He told him how this seer foresaw the coming of white people to Afrika saying he got information from white dotted frogs hiding deep in the green of banana plantations. In white butterflies that flew

in the sun he foretold the coming of many aeroplanes. Now the young man searched Rei's eyes deeply.

"It is not our mistake, but it is our fault. You and I did not kill our people, but we both did. We all have blood on our hands!" Watu boomed.

"We have to deal with it," Rei said bravely. He knew he had no way out.

"I do not know if they will let me live longer and I also do not know if I can live longer with this, is the end the same?"

Watu urged Rei to go back to his land before the sun- in the way it burnt Kenya as it shone in empires- broke his skin and he became a bleeding well.

"In your land, the sun will be kinder and gentler," Watu said.

"I will return there."

"When you are safely back home, write to me, if you wish to. My e-mail is batum@the crossroads.com. I have not said we cannot talk. We never do that, it is untraditional. I still believe in my origins and our sharp sight and I have it right. We have more than one seer today!"

"I revere you. I bow down and honestly confess that I know that. Namaste!" He said, holding his hands together and bowing.

"Thank you," Watu said and left without looking back.

Wairi's song

In a shack at the Mathare slums, Wairi wished that she were a *matatu*. Whenever she wished she was something, sometimes a river, other times a rainbow, sometimes a cow or an aeroplane, many feelings would come to her. She would sing her song in a muzzled monotone. She put these words into that sad tone as she hummed:

"If I were a *matatu*, I would color myself whatever color I wished, I would tell everyone just how I felt with my music. I would have a

in the sun he foretold the coming of many aeroplanes. Now the young man searched Rei's eyes deeply.

"It is not our mistake, but it is our fault. You and I did not kill our people, but we both did. We all have blood on our hands!" Watu boomed.

"We have to deal with it," Rei said bravely. He knew he had no way out.

"I do not know if they will let me live longer and I also do not know if I can live longer with this, is the end the same?"

Watu urged Rei to go back to his land before the sun- in the way it burnt Kenya as it shone in empires- broke his skin and he became a bleeding well.

"In your land, the sun will be kinder and gentler," Watu said.

"I will return there."

"When you are safely back home, write to me, if you wish to. My e-mail is batum@the crossroads.com. I have not said we cannot talk. We never do that, it is untraditional. I still believe in my origins and our sharp sight and I have it right. We have more than one seer today!"

"I revere you. I bow down and honestly confess that I know that. Namaste!" He said, holding his hands together and bowing.

"Thank you," Watu said and left without looking back.

Wairi's song

In a shack at the Mathare slums, Wairi wished that she were a *matatu*. Whenever she wished she was something, sometimes a river, other times a rainbow, sometimes a cow or an aeroplane, many feelings would come to her. She would sing her song in a muzzled monotone. She put these words into that sad tone as she hummed:

"If I were a *matatu*, I would color myself whatever color I wished, I would tell everyone just how I felt with my music. I would have a

licence and roam this country on the roads. I would manoeuvre myself how I want and get what I want. I would run away from here at breakneck speed and no cop would catch me. I would be washed and driven by people chosen for me by someone who thinks I have no power since am a thing, but I know I do the power I have. I know a *matatu* has power to resist. Power to resist the hands on the wheel and to choose its own destination.

I wish I were a *matatu* driven by somebody. If I were such a *matatu*, he would drive me, he would turn me in this or that direction on a code we have agreed to. If he disobeyed I would soon break down and become a wreck. If I were a *matatu*, I would have: breaks, clutch pads, accelerator, diesel, seats and even safety belts. Maybe, if I were a *matatu* I could choose what kind of pads to wear and how long to be accelerated. Maybe I could choose my type of diesel. Maybe my seats too would be my choice and my safety belts. *I would have power to break with all these if I wished to. I would when I became a matatu that is driven properly, choose to have passengers whom I like or dislike.* I would be taking them, not where they think they are going, but where actually only I know where they will end up. Sometimes I would choose to take them to what they might call hot hell, when they think am the one who is about to meet my end and be dumped in garage. I would surprise them as they see me live to see many other years. When am the angry *matatu*, I could choose to hit sleek and cool vehicles, and see them towed to their makers. I would be taking passengers and cars not where they think they are going but where I decide to take them. As for my riders, they would never stop coming to me and going to come again as they would need me their own money to earn. I know they are dancing with hope, always looking for me. Ha! I wish I were a *matatu*, Wairi sighed.

If I were a *matatu*, I would be a happy *matatu*, getting myself thick tyres and using my exhaust to push pain out of myself to someone else. I would smile when carrying children. Listen to their funny stories; the ones they tell dogs and trees and sticks when no one else in the world is

listening. I would watch the elderly carefully. I would hear all those conversations and listen to silent hearts when some sing to take a traveller home into the ground. I would join all who would sing the songs nobody wants to hear after they have stolen our good songs. I would sing these songs with courage. I would keep myself intact then, but, I am not a matatu and I am not a nut. I am a clever woman held in bondage.

I am not proud of myself. I hide in a little mirror that I put away safely. When I wash myself, the waters wash me, but my tears follow to salt my open wounds. The sores that took away my pleasure who can ever heal them?" A tapping sound quickly reminded her that it was time for Yaadi to come home.

Tonight

At exactly 4 pm, Rika was at The Gama Hotel. She headed straight to the poolside and there, she found Rei sitting under one of the umbrellas far from the entrance. The evening had a surprise of soft sunshine. The sun shone brightly and it pierced the skin gently. It was a present for a cold July evening. The weather patterns were changing all over the world. Rika hanged her light green jacket at the back of the seat as they each pulled out their chairs at the same time and sat down.

"All these visits you want to make are exciting. The gang... the gang... too. Exciting and very complex. All these gangs are different and few Kenyans understand them. If you say they do this or that, they change their behavior and you begin to doubt yourself. But I know what we writers feel when our mind is set on a story. I know nothing will do until you get something and get your own perspectives. It is an interesting matter."

"Thanks."

"Well, I have been thinking about a different way to that information for you.

listening. I would watch the elderly carefully. I would hear all those conversations and listen to silent hearts when some sing to take a traveller home into the ground. I would join all who would sing the songs nobody wants to hear after they have stolen our good songs. I would sing these songs with courage. I would keep myself intact then, but, I am not a matatu and I am not a nut. I am a clever woman held in bondage.

I am not proud of myself. I hide in a little mirror that I put away safely. When I wash myself, the waters wash me, but my tears follow to salt my open wounds. The sores that took away my pleasure who can ever heal them?" A tapping sound quickly reminded her that it was time for Yaadi to come home.

Tonight

At exactly 4 pm, Rika was at The Gama Hotel. She headed straight to the poolside and there, she found Rei sitting under one of the umbrellas far from the entrance. The evening had a surprise of soft sunshine. The sun shone brightly and it pierced the skin gently. It was a present for a cold July evening. The weather patterns were changing all over the world. Rika hanged her light green jacket at the back of the seat as they each pulled out their chairs at the same time and sat down.

"All these visits you want to make are exciting. The gang... the gang... too. Exciting and very complex. All these gangs are different and few Kenyans understand them. If you say they do this or that, they change their behavior and you begin to doubt yourself. But I know what we writers feel when our mind is set on a story. I know nothing will do until you get something and get your own perspectives. It is an interesting matter."

"Thanks."

"Well, I have been thinking about a different way to that information for you.

“Yes? Good.”

“I know one of the girls I interviewed on the street at night is a Sabasaba Defence bride. I got to know this when the night girls helped me get to see their male clients who usually drive off quite fast. I noticed she was extremely scared of the policemen we met. Later she told me that one of them reports to the gang in the night and she was afraid that he had been looking at her strangely. She feared that perhaps he recognized her.”

“Oh, that sounds intriguing!”

“She speaks English well. You can meet her tonight and then decide how long you want to chat with her. You will need to give her a cash incentive but pay her after you have your story. She will tell you a lot about the gang.”

“Fine. Where do we meet her tonight?” Rei asked impatiently.

“Tell, you what, since am off work tomorrow, I will go home now and at 9.30 pm I will come back here and then I will show you where you will meet here. I will speak to her first and explain carefully that you need privacy and that you only want information not...”

“Yes, that is important.”

“You know she got very free with me when she realized I write in The Sabat News.”

“Why?”

“Well, her dream is to one day get a passport and leave the country. She has no chance of living past the day on which her betrayal is discovered by her ‘husband’. No chance of surviving even if they do not discover she has been leaking information. Leaving her house at night to come to the streets she takes a big risk and it is unforgivable to the gang!”

“Oh, is it this bad?”

“It is worse. If they know about my connections with these girls, I will be in trouble too!”

“Now, I understand the weight of the issue.”

“No. You don’t. You may say you are not white but the people here see you as white. And white here, am sorry, still means set apart in the minds of many people. It still means one is arrogant, one who is fussy and does not want to be touched by the lives and hands of the locals and one who must have everything right, *mzungu*. It is very different with the nuns and priests and missionaries. Once you are seen in the city at night, it means you have luxuries to offer. Even at day time, if you are a tourist, it means you have something to spare. I want to warn you that you are still in danger at two levels. One, the gang. Make up your mind if you really want to go into this. Two, the night girls. You do not want to run into a situation where either the girl or the cops take advantage of you. We are doing this in deep trust. You see, if she betrayed you, she could get more money than we could ever offer her and you could get killed. If the cops saw you with her and some other girls, you could be framed for trafficking humans or drugs and I do not know of a crime more serious!”

“I will not falter. I think your first instinct was that we can get this done, and so we will.” Rei felt like reaching out to touch Rika’s hand but he was afraid to be misunderstood. Everyone was very careful these days everywhere. A sexual harassment suit in the West or by a prominent woman in Nairobi was not easy to wriggle out of .

Rei’s eyes had a few red lines shooting all over like a little net. He needed rest and less excitement but he could not bring himself to lie down. Suddenly, after his chocolate drink, he felt fully energized and ready to go. He knew that this was an either make or break move but he was prepared to do it.

“Excuse me a moment!” Rei said.

“Yes, of course! And meanwhile can I light up?”

“Sure, I do not mind, and we are outside!”

Rei thrust his hand into his bag. He found a little bottle. Took it and head back, he put some eye drops into his left eye. He felt cool. He

threw the next three drops into the right eye. One could see, this was something he did often.

"I hope you have taken anti malaria tablets," Said Rika.

"Yes, I have," Rei answered. "I also have good creams for skin protection. I am not taking any chances."

"But in your investigation you are!?"

Rika scrutinized his face as she puffed out smoke to the right at an angle just past his face. She knew it was no longer sexy to smoke but she needed it. It was already embarrassing, even old fashioned, for anyone to be seen smoking in Nairobi.

"Yes, I will do it."

"As you do it, and I support you fully, remember this puts us all in danger. Just yesterday, a priest from my rural home told me that now people watch behind their backs when they say, 'Saba', which means seven in Kiswahili. The priest told the story of how women in the market hushed him fast when he asked to buy seven bananas in the market. He was reminded promptly by the women that now, no one asked for anything to the figure of seven in Kiswahili. Saba. He mused at how then he would preach about the seven sacraments and figure seven actually appeared many times in the scriptures. 7 was the figure for plenty of or many, many, many people or anything; anything eternal and one of the gang's names had to do with many *ad infinitum*. Rei realized 7 and not 13 was the number that had power over people here.

"So, to be many, to be 'sabaaa' is dangerous?" Rei asked.

"Then the story goes that the Sabasaba Defence Force are meeting daily at the many crossroads in all the villages I normally visit. They say they are planning things. Just imagine if they have such guts after months of many of them and other innocent people being shot dead by police!"

"I understand. But I see you are courageous. I know about your night visits."

“Yes of course. This is my life and my children go to school because I do my work well. If we lived in Afghanistan, we would have to be braver. Brave like Lalai and not afraid of death! This is my motherland.”

Rei looked at Rika as if he was seeing a new person. He suddenly saw her in her full perspective. He knew of Lalai. Lalai had the power to move the masses to elect her as a Member of Parliament. When she got to Parliament, she looked around her and announced that members in her view were like animals in the zoo and that she had to apologise to the animals, not to the members because the animals were innocent!”

She now lived at large fighting for the freedom which is never found in Parliaments anywhere in the world.

He saw the inner Rika that very few people had seen. Rika a mother and a fighter. It was clear. Here was mother and taker of risks in life. Here was Rika of the big revolutionary flame hidden in her that only few people knew about. Rika the fighter. Rei was amazed by this woman and again he remembered Martel and his little book. Martel wanted to teach people to shrink their countries into their hearts so that their countries could grow. Rika had loved and learnt Martel’s lesson.

No bedtime stories

“Hey, talking about priests and your area, tell me, are your parents alive and do they live near here?”

“Yes. Mum is alive. She was a teacher. Dad died in 1990. He was a driver. He was two years older than my mother and in his thirties he was detained because he fought for freedom and was in Mau Mau.”

“Oh, really?” Rei leaned forward.

“Have you read Britain’s Gulag?”

“No.”

“You will like it”

“Yes of course. This is my life and my children go to school because I do my work well. If we lived in Afghanistan, we would have to be braver. Brave like Lalai and not afraid of death! This is my motherland.”

Rei looked at Rika as if he was seeing a new person. He suddenly saw her in her full perspective. He knew of Lalai. Lalai had the power to move the masses to elect her as a Member of Parliament. When she got to Parliament, she looked around her and announced that members in her view were like animals in the zoo and that she had to apologise to the animals, not to the members because the animals were innocent!”

She now lived at large fighting for the freedom which is never found in Parliaments anywhere in the world.

He saw the inner Rika that very few people had seen. Rika a mother and a fighter. It was clear. Here was mother and taker of risks in life. Here was Rika of the big revolutionary flame hidden in her that only few people knew about. Rika the fighter. Rei was amazed by this woman and again he remembered Martel and his little book. Martel wanted to teach people to shrink their countries into their hearts so that their countries could grow. Rika had loved and learnt Martel’s lesson.

No bedtime stories

“Hey, talking about priests and your area, tell me, are your parents alive and do they live near here?”

“Yes. Mum is alive. She was a teacher. Dad died in 1990. He was a driver. He was two years older than my mother and in his thirties he was detained because he fought for freedom and was in Mau Mau.”

“Oh, really?” Rei leaned forward.

“Have you read Britain’s Gulag?”

“No.”

“You will like it”

“It is never the same to read a story as to hear someone tell it themselves. I wish I had met your father.”

“You can meet ex Mau Mau even today, including women who were detained. Well, yes, my father ...”

“He seemed to speak about things freely to you...”

“Yes, he told us that he was detained for four years during which, because my mother said her Rosary prayer as did my father in detention, she was able to survive it. She told stories of how she used spiritual power to get things done. Power in her hands, power in her own way. What was I to say? If he had not left detention, I would not have been born and I am happy to live! He got news from her that day as he prayed too. It was a day he had sensed his own death in his cell after tremendous manual labor and excruciating physical exercises commanded for hours on end”, Rika said.

Father used to tell us that they spent hours scrounging and hopping around the compound and getting beaten as they went round and round in a posture they called ‘rabbit’. He had retired to his cell to die, and thought that before he died, it would be good to say my Mum’s favorite prayer, the rosary, not his own prayer. I get puzzled by how religion chains and liberates. I am influenced by Tagore and Gandhi. I think all religions are from the East and not rooted in Europe as many of us here believe. It was just that it was the Europeans who brought Christianity to us.”

“Excuse me for asking this but religion in Kenya intrigues me. Do you pray Rika?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Do you pray in a chapel or church such as the Live Ministries I see everywhere?”

“In pray in my own way. I really think no-one can do this spiritual thing for anyone and so I follow my own rules. While I work and when I finally rest on my bed on Saturday mornings, I pray.”

"I am a non-theist. I am just being honest with myself. I find it hard or impossible to believe what mainstream religions teach us. I was supposed to be brought up as a Christian, but after getting me baptized, my own parents did not follow the rules. I was out at fourteen."

"Parents must follow up their word or leave children alone. Why put them into something and then leave then abandon them?"

"I agree. Well, I understand mine. Maybe it was a hard time they were going through and you know, society organizes us in all ways... even in marriage, and then it leaves us to stick with it alone. There are no communities any more in Europe... people live alone and die alone. Many Afrikan people clapped when the plane I was on landed. They smiled too and spoke on the flight. I liked this."

"Rika, do you have brothers and sisters?"

"Yes. We are nine. Six girls and three boys!"

"Dramatic change at family level considering yours now. Change has taken place, except politically."

"I have two elder sisters; Luce and Mut, and my late elder brother Ita. He had two rooms for a house. It was called Harlem and it was right in our village. He often sang Bob Marley's '*Stand up for your rights.. don't give up the fight!*' He sang *House of the Rising Sun* and danced to Tabu Ley's *Kafu Mayay*. He went to America to study, but not on those groups they call "airlifts". He was a grantee of an institute to study community development. He lived in Harlem, Manhattan and that is where he came from to return to Kariobangi in Nairobi. He was murdered seven months after his return. People thought he was too rich when they got to hear he was in America. They found a few bank notes in his wallet."

"That was not Sabasaba Defence?"

"Not at all. Sabasaba Defence did not exist then, it started a couple of years later. And at the time, the gang seemed innocent, it was a call to return to our African roots. Much had changed. Aids was here. Too much alcohol and drug abuse in the rural villages too. People drank till

they got blind and others just dropped dead. Quiet rural areas were aflame. It is still the same. All that is not traditional. How do people cope with all these changes? We lost our ways and the mili-gang could see that. They were doing their best to put us back on track but you cannot change if you set yourself apart.”

“There was no employment in the way it had been in three decades before. It became rare. Rape increased. Police brutality increased. People died too easily. Schools built by missionaries became dilapidated and the educational system hollow...”

“Did you get any answers on Ita’s death?” Rei asked.

“We know nothing about that,” Rika said sadly.

“That is hard,” said Rei, “At least when one gets to know who, the hurt heals a little.”

“No,” She said.

Rei did not want to ask her what she meant. He could feel her pain. She went on unprompted.

“I can tell you our story. I want to tell you that when Ita and I grew up in the village life for us was hard and it got harder still when we got out of there and were well educated. But there are so many, many who never left the village we were born in. They lived and died where they were born. I remember the many questions that went through my mind when I was young. I never rested. There were all these burning questions on my mind. They were all about what to do in order to break out of the cycle of village poverty as a family. What could I do to bring running water to our taps? What could I do to keep the earth fertile? Already we were seeing ruined soils, only stunted maize was growing. Maize stems were breaking in the waist, so to speak, as soon as the plants were only about three feet high. That was long before the millennium development goals of 2005. Many of us then were so keen to bring change but there was no one to share with us what we wanted to do. We were fertile and pregnant with opportunity. Greed hijacked that transition. Political

leaders looked inwards, as J.M. Kariuki, one Member of Parliament and Kenyatta's personal secretary kept saying; politicians shared spoils with cronies. He saw the days we are living in. But he was assassinated in 1975. Nobody continued with his verve and clarity in Parliament. People went silent for a long time. Maybe this is when other countries left us behind. Singapore more densely populated and Malaysia got independent in 1963. Singapore even puzzled China with her success in the past. It is incredible that their capita income could rise to 30 000\$ when we are still at 350\$. One of our problems, they say, is population. But big populations seem to do very well economically. We had great dreams but we just kept them to ourselves in school debates and long conversations in the village. When we acted our plight in village dramas, some books were banned. A famous author and his colleagues went into exile. We had no real voice. It was never the same again. We read about Elvis Presley and Gaddafi in our media. But I was privileged to get an opportunity to study well. All my brothers and sisters were. I can understand the restless current generation. Frustration. They graduated and did not get employed. HIV/Aids. So much history of pain in such few words. HIV/Aids... just seven letters... more poverty and less purchasing power! In my days one could at least grow tomatoes, sell them and get rich. Today, the rivers have shrunk and there is a constant tussle about GMOs!"

"Oh, yes, the environmental degradation and changes in world agriculture!" Exclaimed Rei.

"I'd better be going now. I need to see the kids before they sleep. They know I have my days off soon, they are going to be surprised that still... I must leave them when I have my off. I will make it up to them."

"I can't thank you enough Rika. Thanks so much! ...and I am guilty of keeping you long. I am sorry."

Gilding the night

Wairi hit the road that night. She bandaged her cuts and planned to wear a long sleeved blouse under her transparent golden threaded sash. She needed to disguise those fresh cuts on her upper arms. She was doing fine and making money in carefully covered bandages and bruises. She was losing weight, however. This was mainly from the stress of wondering if all would be well at the end of every night. Her 'husband' never suspected her, for by morning, he was always exhausted. Besides, she only did her nights thrice a week. She knew how to look as fresh as a rose in the morning even when she was not. She used a cheap cream called Fairy Nights to lighten up her bruises. She knew how to heal wounds in a short time. She and other girls knew a lot. They knew people. They knew how to become 'virgins' overnight using powerful creams. And the men cried and mourned, thinking that was it. Rika knew these girls were highly intelligent. They always got you to think and believe what they said was the only possible truth. When there were differences over who was guilty of a small crime, say a missing earring – or any time there was a problem and they were suspect- you ended up feeling guilty for not believing their story. They applied their art to all their lives. They were great mind readers. They managed the cops in town besides making them feel they depended on them and not their guns; and that they were nothing without these girls. They wielded intangible power as the world slept. Was this not true of the market women as well, and women in all social strata?

"Hi Rei! Please meet Pica!" Rika said introducing Rei to Wairi at a table in the corner of an Ethiopian restaurant near the Uhuru Park.

She had already briefed Wairi who used an alias -Pica- on the street.

Pica got up and graciously smiled shaking Rei's hand. The three sat down. They ordered drinks. Rei and Rika had asked for coffee. Pica ordered for tea.

Rika knew how to break the ice perfectly. She started the conversation talking about her brother who died. She had just told Pica how kind Rei was and that he had asked after her brother.

Wairi was lucky that night. Here was a man from Europe who said he would just talk with her but would offer her 100\$. This was a lot of money by any standards, and all for herself! She said she would take him to any place he wanted to talk to her in, including in a bed.

“He only wants to understand some things about our country,” Rika had told her. “He wants to know how you girls struggle and some other things. You remember how you helped me with my story? Help him too, O.K?”

Rika had briefed Rei that the safest place to sit at would be an up-market disco on ‘K’ street as everyone called it now. In there, they could find a safe place for their private discussion even late into the night.

Rei was content that Pica, whose other name he did not know was wearing a long coat. In any case, he did not really care much about whom he was seen walking about town with. Who would bother? He wondered however, about the things that Rika had hinted to her about his security, but what was he to do? Too late, he had already begun his journey.

Lights

The lights splash around the night girls favorite spot like fire crackers bursting in the sky. Some other girls come near and something long shines all the way up the legs of one of them, bursting like a dying shooting star in her groin. She smokes with two others, their tops are small and shiny. They know what they want you to see. You cannot ignore that face brightened by a rouge lipstick and make up super well done, making her face scream; ‘am here!’ She has short hair at the back, dark skin, a beautiful face. ‘I am here!’ She seems to scream, ‘eat me

Rika knew how to break the ice perfectly. She started the conversation talking about her brother who died. She had just told Pica how kind Rei was and that he had asked after her brother.

Wairi was lucky that night. Here was a man from Europe who said he would just talk with her but would offer her 100\$. This was a lot of money by any standards, and all for herself! She said she would take him to any place he wanted to talk to her in, including in a bed.

“He only wants to understand some things about our country,” Rika had told her. “He wants to know how you girls struggle and some other things. You remember how you helped me with my story? Help him too, O.K?”

Rika had briefed Rei that the safest place to sit at would be an up-market disco on ‘K’ street as everyone called it now. In there, they could find a safe place for their private discussion even late into the night.

Rei was content that Pica, whose other name he did not know was wearing a long coat. In any case, he did not really care much about whom he was seen walking about town with. Who would bother? He wondered however, about the things that Rika had hinted to her about his security, but what was he to do? Too late, he had already begun his journey.

Lights

The lights splash around the night girls favorite spot like fire crackers bursting in the sky. Some other girls come near and something long shines all the way up the legs of one of them, bursting like a dying shooting star in her groin. She smokes with two others, their tops are small and shiny. They know what they want you to see. You cannot ignore that face brightened by a rouge lipstick and make up super well done, making her face scream; ‘am here!’ She has short hair at the back, dark skin, a beautiful face. ‘I am here!’ She seems to scream, ‘eat me

up!’ They have seen Rei but he walks with Pica whom they know well. That is alright, but tomorrow, she must pay them a protection fee, especially now that they have told her in their language that the cop was around but not near and that she could be free to “eat- all- of- the –white- man”. That was their advice for her. They told her she needed a better tomorrow and that she knew that best. “Are you going to cry to us all the days of your life?” they asked her in rhetoric. They did not tell her that they had a plan for a better future for all of them. They just smiled happily. Pica did not know they would ask her for 10% of her earnings. It was just like buying them tea, they argued, in case they were not so ‘lucky’ that night. Perhaps many bad nights were going to follow them.

Back home

As they sat down round a cosy little table, Rei remembered his office in Geneva briefly. The thought was driven out of his mind when Pica firmly put down a book on the table. Rei quickly read the bold title. “The Road to Justice.” He scrutinized her little bag. It sure was like a small factory, equipped with everything in there, he thought.

Rei yawned. In spite of all the coffee he had taken in the afternoon, he was weary. It was his girlfriend, who thought she was his fiancée, who should have been haunting his memory. It was the smell of the flat on one of their late evenings that should have been teasing his nostrils, but his mind could not have been further from all that. In his suede brown jacket he was warm, but he still ordered a hot toddy. He needed a shot of rum to help clear his throat and chest. The smiling waiter brought him a perfect one with the recipe. Pica picked it up and looked at it keenly.

I tbsp honey
1 slice lemon

up!’ They have seen Rei but he walks with Pica whom they know well. That is alright, but tomorrow, she must pay them a protection fee, especially now that they have told her in their language that the cop was around but not near and that she could be free to “eat- all- of- the –white- man”. That was their advice for her. They told her she needed a better tomorrow and that she knew that best. “Are you going to cry to us all the days of your life?” they asked her in rhetoric. They did not tell her that they had a plan for a better future for all of them. They just smiled happily. Pica did not know they would ask her for 10% of her earnings. It was just like buying them tea, they argued, in case they were not so ‘lucky’ that night. Perhaps many bad nights were going to follow them.

Back home

As they sat down round a cosy little table, Rei remembered his office in Geneva briefly. The thought was driven out of his mind when Pica firmly put down a book on the table. Rei quickly read the bold title. “The Road to Justice.” He scrutinized her little bag. It sure was like a small factory, equipped with everything in there, he thought.

Rei yawned. In spite of all the coffee he had taken in the afternoon, he was weary. It was his girlfriend, who thought she was his fiancée, who should have been haunting his memory. It was the smell of the flat on one of their late evenings that should have been teasing his nostrils, but his mind could not have been further from all that. In his suede brown jacket he was warm, but he still ordered a hot toddy. He needed a shot of rum to help clear his throat and chest. The smiling waiter brought him a perfect one with the recipe. Pica picked it up and looked at it keenly.

I tbsp honey
1 slice lemon

3/4 glass tea
2 shots brandy

She too smiled. Rei had cuddled his big glass in front of him for a long time and it kept him warm. He told Pica he was going to make some in the hotel room to ward off his on-coming cold. Pica said she had learned something new.

Pica explained that she never drunk alcohol at night but that she thought a good drink would help her bear her days. She asked for another tea. He was surprised that she did not ask for alcohol. All these assumptions that people make on street girls, he thought. Who would have thought that this one spoke good English and was so eager to learn new things?

Rika had explained about an 'r' and 'l' switch of sounds that did not happen all the time in Pica's speech. Rei had smiled saying he had been to Japan and spoken often in English with Japanese people and it was the same. Rika also said not everyone of course had the same variations in sounds even in Japan pointing out that there are many people of the same background who spoke differently. She mentioned the 'm' and 'n' sounds as well, but Rei had not noticed any of this. Good English here in the middle of a cold Nairobi night, and only drinking good old harmless tea?

"Pica," Rei said almost clearing his throat at the same time. He was not only tired but also quite nervous to start. He paused for about three seconds and there was complete silence. He had decided to call Pica by name all the time, to bond fast with her. He was not going to ask her about the gang tonight. He was sure if he did she would withdraw. He hoped it would come up spontaneously. If it did not, he would ask her the following night but he was not sure if she would be on the streets again. He could not tell her he had hardly much time in the city as this would probably put her off as well.

"Pica," he continued, tell me something about Nairobi!"

"Are we to sit here all night?" She asked nervously.

"Not if you prefer that we change venue after sometime," Rei answered quickly.

"I think it is better that we do so. It is safer."

"Where do you come from Pica?"

"A village called Gitina Giathina, it means the bottom of poverty or trouble."

"Where is that?"

"Do you know Mount Kenya?"

"Just below it."

"How are your parents?"

"I do not have any, am an orphan."

"Any brothers or sisters, uncles and aunts?"

"I have none."

"You are alone in the world?"

"Yes."

"Where is your home in Nairobi?"

"It is a place called The Rubbish Estate, *Korogocho*." She was not going to tell the truth. Korogocho was a different slum.

"Oh, you live there in Kokorocho, Koch..eh..?"

"Yes."

Rei felt himself get confused and even blush.

"You are very beautiful. You do not look like Rubbish!"

"I Know. That is why I come to the city and one day, I hope I go to AmelikKa"

"Oh, You would like to go there?"

"Oh yes, I could work as a cleaner there or anything. But I have no passport."

"America? Why there?"

"It is the only ab... 'abloand' I know. Is not all abroad AmeliKKa, everywhere where people speak in English is Amelica, the place of the Europeans."

"Well, not quite, do you have a TV or a radio at home?"

"No. Everything in my little place belongs to" She begun to stammer.

"I thought you had no one in the world?"

"Well I live in Yaadi's place and everything in the house except my bag belongs to him. I work for him in the day time."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Ehh... sorry for asking but..."

"I am a silent bride. A cover up for him. Bachelors are suspected.. and he belongs to a secret militia."

"He is a relation?"

"No."

"But he is related to one of the cops I see on this street sometimes in the nights. They are blood, *blond...ee..* brothers."

"What do you mean? Blood brothers in the real sense of the word or they share the same parents?"

"No, they are not even of the same tribe."

"Oh, so blood brothers?"

"Yes, blood brothers."

"Is that common here?"

"No. But Yaadi and others are in a group that meets in the nights."

"What do they do when they meet?"

"I am usually here or in my bed. I do not know, but when he comes back, he is elated and he sings. When he goes, he is tense; and he threatens me never to tell anyone about his clothes which are sometimes marked with blood and mud. He beats me. Just two nights ago he came back all of a sudden in the middle of the morning. In the early morning, we had argued over his shirt, he wanted a blue one and I was so *sreepy*, I gave him a *brlack* one. The light was weak. He cut me up with razors on my upper arms, I can show you that another time. He would make lines of three, look at me and laugh and make three more. I did not cry.

He slapped me. I did not cry. My eyes are dry. But I was very scared. I can tell you, I thought I was urinating on myself. Suddenly, blood fell to the floor and he beat me up faster then. He told me that I am a carpet of grass for him to walk on. He said he hated me. He does not come near me or want to touch me even in the dark, when I open the door for him at 4 am. He tells me, and on such days when he is drunk that I am a fool. That I have no mouth, and that if I speak I am dead. He also wonders if I have any god on my side or for me.”

Her voice became higher and raspy with pain. She breathed in, harnessing all her strength to continue.

“That is why I would like to go to *Amerlikka*, I can find freedom there. I hear it walks on the street there, freedom. I too would like to dance with freedom. He does not know that I talk to any one. He does not know that I come to town. He does not even know that I speak *Englch*. That is why we must move from this spot. You know, it looks like a place of very rich people but the people who work with Yaadi in the gang are everywhere, some of them are policemen and others are business people. I think some are even politicians. Let’s go to a little restaurant off this main street,” Pica trailed off.

‘As they crossed the road, Pica asked Rei to move on along ahead and she followed. He obeyed all her instructions. He knew it would be indiscreet to take her to his hotel room. There was hardly anyone around and he could see Pica coming along behind him. Anyway, he was only going to be about half an hour with her as it was getting close to midnight and he felt he had got more than he expected for the night.

When they settled on the bare little table, he noticed three Caucasian men one of them seemingly haggling with a call girl and the other two drinking with their girls.

They pulled their chairs and Rei started.

“Why didn’t you cry when he cut you up?”

“There was no need. If the neighbours came to help, they all belong to the gang. We are the so called brides, we do not speak among ourselves.

If we are found as much as borrowing something like a little sugar, the punishment is 6 canes on the back. If I screamed, even if they came over, they would just come to stare and seeing what he was doing to me they would immediately know what I had done. There is a set punishment for every mistake there and everyone knows the crime one has committed just by seeing the punishment one has to suffer. The members do not speak in words and yet they speak. Even in a public meeting they can speak silently, these members. Their silence speaks violence to me. They are not good. Yaadi did all that he wanted with my body. I remained silent. Cursed be this silence. It is a cursed silence. He told me I had no voice and suddenly he started to sing when we were alone and asked me what kept me from singing. It felt as if he was mad. His songs are theirs. They are strong and sometimes threatening songs; it is not like any music you know. He was mocking me as if I was the whole country which he says he loves but hates because of the rich and those who rule it; those two are one. It is the rich who rule. I must go home daily before 3.30am and always in disguise. The day he will find out, I will die. Don't be surprised, I am not afraid to die."

Rei looked at her with much pity.

"Do you talk to anyone about these things?"

"I last spoke to our friend the journalist."

"Anybody else?"

"You."

"Oh, me?"

Just then at the door stood two cops. They came in and ordered a drink. As soon as they turned their back to the counter, Pica winked at him, took her handbag and left. Using his phone, he called the cab at The Gama saying he was opposite Jevanjee gardens at Rib Cash. The taxi driver was in the restaurant in less than three minutes and he left with Rei. The cops walked out close behind him, They stopped and scribbled something. Rei thought they took note of the number plate of the cab.

The donkey

Rika alighted from a *matatu* she had taken at the Globe Roundabout that Saturday morning. In twenty minutes, she had made out of the city. Finally, she was able to relax a little. She was fond of local music and was irritated that foreign music played in the *matatu* all the way. It was the same music one heard in big hotels and no surprise then that as she stepped on muddy ground, memories of her brief evening visit to the Thorn Tree invaded her. She always felt how hard it was to pay her parents a quick visit and yet they lived so near the city.

The feel of the Thorn Tree place with the smooth floor of the Stanley was still hidden somewhere under the memory of the soles of her shoes. She had been there often. And each time, again the shining men and women were everywhere doing business that never seemed to stop. She remembered the TV a few days before. She remembered how she had held her wrist and found herself checking her own pulse in a strange way when she saw these people.

She started walking with thoughts about culture in Kenya on her mind. It was fine that all music should be shared but people had to listen to their own music too. Apart from *Jambo Bwana*, *Hakuna Matata*.. .how many out there knew of our pop music, poetry? Would we always remain a folksong? Who covered the real dance? *Taxi Draiva* maybe was too old a song...., and the puncture business on the way to Nakuru to see a lover forgotten, but now Wainaina sang *Abiro*. *Abiro mos, mos*, to his lover in Nyanza. The journeys to rural homes were always so hard. She begun humming *Abiro*...softly to herself as she organized how to carry wicker baskets fully of the shopping she had done.

Rika had wondered what would have become of such young people, the ones who chose that music in the *matatus*, if there had been local cultural centres in the village. A famous Kenyan novelist had started one in Kamirithu near Limuru and its offshoot in Western Kenya was in the offing in those days. Then trouble started. Ngugi wa Thiong'o

was detained by Kenyatta's government. The story and the meaning seemed to go like this. Inspiring and resisting rural people were feared. These villagers were looking into the clean mirror of their lives which they created in drama. The people saw themselves in the mirror and they started breathing life into the mirror. The mirror began to become wider covering Central and Western Kenya, and the government panicked. The mirror preferred reflecting the people and they became more beautiful and powerful.

For Rika the story was that the spirit of art was alive and had began dancing with the spirit of the people and the people recognized the oneness of spirit in words. The will and the power of choice were the glass that made the mirror.

Could one of them, either the writer or the people, once so enchanted stop the attraction to unity and change? No one could break the mirror. It had now begun to shine in the eyes of the people. It was so bright and clear. So sharp in seeing the truth. Government could not arrest the people. They arrested all those who shone more in the mirror of the people, one by one they locked them in. Status quo does not like turbulence.

She went through that story mentally. The mirror of the people was broken and in Kenyatta's eyes it was shattered into many pieces forever. He saw that precious minerals that were mined in Taita Taveta and gold and silver from elsewhere were better than the people's poor choice of glass and mirrors. They said he had a vision.

The people continued to look for their mirror. They were in love with it. This enchantment was so strong, it continued silently until the village rivers of Afrika began to overflow into the great Ganges in India, and went past it, went on flowing and overflowing with many tongues. The tongues were the languages that carried the power of the people. The tongues were fiery and the water did not cool them. Rika hummed.

Some questions came to her mind gently. It was a woman who had knocked at Ngugi's door asking him to join the villagers for peoples'

theatre and to share with them his ideas. Rika wondered if he who detained Ngugi did they not know one cannot ever imprison the spirit of a woman for it shines from the womb like life? Did they not know? Did they not know that the spirit of woman flows and flows every day of the month this spirit?

Did the *matatu* passengers like the citizens of the nation think that anyone truly cared that they arrived safely to their destination? Many of them had no idea why some singers far away idolized Africa, they sank in their music.

Rika recalled the time Kenya waited in vain for Michael Jackson's visit. Jermaine arrived. The girls and staff at Bondeni went wild with excitement even without the king of pop.

Months later, one evening, Ngugi wa Thiong'o had sat quietly with students in the same college. They closed the pages of his book after sometime. They had only wanted to hear from James Ngugi not from Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Many secretaries began to carefully pack James Hardly Chase novels into their handbags. They read them from their laps as they peeped occasionally to watch for the boss. Others knitted away strong knotty cardigans in government offices.

Today, on the highway that went past Deiya, one could count so many donkeys even when seated in a moving vehicle. The donkey that Rika saw now, blinked its eyes and staggering she carried on as Rika stared at her. Her front leg forward on a sloppy patch, she looked as if she would collapse and die. She looked like she wanted to throw off the load that she dragged in the cart she pulled behind her, and splay her rear legs, and stretching out breathe her last.

The sad and poor donkey must have got used to just taking one step after another and never getting a stroke of affection but only canes of pain. Just like this land that hardly yielded crops although surrounded by the richest and most productive highlands in Kenya, the poor donkey was dejected, so poor, lonely and hungry.

Yet not so far away, big trailers owned by rich merchants not just in Kenya but in eastern Africa and other parts of the world, snaked their way from Mombasa to Kampala, carrying heavy loads and smashing the tarmac road on the Nakuru/Eldoret highway. On the road were small cars, big cars, buses, lorries, and mini buses. One could see many four wheel fuel guzzlers. Mercedes Benz, Prado and BMWs one just had to name it and one saw it. There were all sorts of cars on the road, just like in any rich country. Sometimes, they ended up in unusual accidents, smash ups.

A small hardy pick-up truck a farmer drove on the dangerous Kinungi area hit a president's car. Heavy mist. The farmer in great fear said that the mirrors of his eyes were seeing far, but that the mist covered the rear mirror of his pick up. He was driving on the wrong side of the road. He was incoherent and he slumped down on his seat and seemed to sleep.

The news was only told in present tense all over the country. A farmer meets a president on the road in an accident. In no time, some chase cars appear. They rush one to Nairobi Hospital in a new chase Mercedes Benz. The other, is left there by all the other cars that pass by. Finally another farmer drives him carefully to Jabe Hospital. The vehicle the farmer has can only move at a maximum of 35 kilometers per hour in the best season of the year.

Nairobi Hospital was as good a medical facility as any in London or Paris. In Jabe Hospital, there are hardly any facilities but good missionaries and dedicated people are waiting for the sick. Dying patients are carried between two or three persons, there are no wheelchairs.

It is a health facility as poor as some urban ones in which patients died for lack of hospital oxygen.

Rika remembered a stinging letter to the press from a reader in the Rift Valley. It was about the only clinic there was in a village deep within

a valley in the big Rift Valley. He said they were tired of taking pregnant mothers there on wheelbarrows on part of the road and then carrying them in blanket slings to get them to a clinic. It was hard to make the journey and then find that there was no medicine available. There often were no basic first aid requirements. It was the same in many places East, West, South and North of the country.

Only the capital had better facilities but most of them were unaffordable for most people. People died too because they could not afford bus fare to the city. It was clear in Rika's mind. There are two parallel highways in Kenyan health, education and also transport. One is paved with the hooves of bleeding donkeys, and the other with the gold of their mines. These were as parallel as railway lines and Kenyans often spoke about it. If you had money, you could live. If you did not, you knew what that meant.

Sometimes on the highways, but ever so rarely now, one would see a minister's car with without a flag speeding down to the city. That would be a minister's car without a minister inside. Ministers flew back to Nairobi to save time. There were many flights from Nairobi to Kisumu and Eldoret.

Ministers also flew to do business in the West, the North and South. They flew East to islands for holidays. They flew off the coast and from coast to coast following the sun while old people nursed rheumatism with warm ashes from their smoldering fires in cold July. The Politicians Airline was ever busy. They owned big crafts and little planes and choppers. The younger ministers were even better at this. They learnt how to fly their own crafts, and to find time for that, they missed parliamentary sessions. Insanity increased amongst ordinary people. There were many songs of sorrow. It was as if every conscious heart was pierced with a spear that went right through it. How was it possible to keep staring at all this and keep healthy?

The song of Rika

Rika sighs. Her heart and mind sing: The donkey and the chopper; the donkey and the aeroplane; there were many different Kenyas. The railway line. The *Matatu*. The bus. The camel. The horse. She thinks of the many Kenyas often. The Kenya of the camel with a marvellous library down its sides; and on its back, a librarian to take stories to children in the North Eastern region. Children waited happily for the Mobile Camel Library. There are many Kenyans who have not been to any national park, they see wildlife in a quiet room only through electronic gadgets. If they live near the parks or reserves, they see the animals that at night destroy their crops.

A donkey kisses the soil and sees its carpet, the grass. Rika looks at it carefully. It kneels and does not need to do the sign of the cross. That sign is on its back. It prays just by braying, keeping silent and keeping still before she moves. A horse walks, trots and gallops in panic at a farm in Karen. There are jockeys of all colors competing and urging their horse to win.

Choppers and other aircrafts do their games in the wind. Our languages like round beads of all colors dance in the sun pierced by FM rays of light. Pilots pray just by doing their thing in the air. Rika meditates writing. Rika dreams that the donkey is not a carrier of Sisyphus's stone. It carries barrels in the cart it drags behind it. Nothing is possible if people are uncertain. Dreamers have two feet on the ground but they fly in their minds.

The soil is as red as blood. The pain that started in the donkey's left bottom where it was hit with a lash, traveled all the way to its head. It burst into heat that spread out fast like the hot dust and lava of an erupting volcano entering every crack it finds on the ground. Moving its long ears, a little coolness spreads to her neck but it does not reach her shoulders. The dumb mule carries on. Pain, un-seen, sweat oozes out of every hair follicle on its skin and spreads to all parts of her body.

She is an ageing donkey at 40 years. Her hooves are cracked. Something dances before her eyes and she smiles. Suddenly, she sees bright lights hovering here and there but their light does not last long. Lightning flashes tear against the dark night. It is as if the lightning is having a ferocious quarrel with the clouds. Maybe the rain, if it fell, would finish the argument, but the rain was tied up in the black clouds.

With each step, the donkey's flesh tears near the shoulder blades. The load behind is very heavy and it pulls back at her loin, the path she walks down is inclined to the lower ground. Now, her right hoof is stuck in a hole, too deep for it to come out, but still, another cane on its rump and the pain again dashes from the right and to the left of itching bottoms, through her flank and then to her head. Flashes of light are all she sees. She is about to collapse but something, perhaps in her still moments, something she holds dear in her memory, holds her together.

The man running behind the donkey is hungry for bread. He is hungry for justice in a greater measure and angrier. The donkey too is hungry. She leaves the soft grass and grabs rough thistles. All day long she has been on its trail. Rika looks at her carefully. A picture of slave trade jumps out of her primary Class Six book and is the only thing she can see on her mind. It is followed fast by the photo she had seen of a woman magistrate who beat up a girl she called house-girl in the Nok shopping Centre until the girl bled almost to death. The picture of the Old man who slept with his youngest nieces was also there. It was red. The images of incest and child trafficking were also in a screaming red color. The pictures began to feel pain. Now, yellow dots of pus grow around all these images. Rika feels nauseated.

Rika had seen it all. Her stories were etched in her soul. She sang of the memory which remembers with feelings and pain. How could she ever forget? She sang of something you cannot explain which gives creative power to the words one uses to record such painful histories.

The barrel was well tied to the sides of the cart. It was firm. It held at least 150 litres of water, she thought. The donkey swayed from side

to side and the man behind the dejected donkey whipped it mercilessly to make it move faster because the rain was starting to fall. Rika thought she saw a black cross on the back of the donkey.

“Uuuumu!” Yaadi yelled at the donkey. And the donkey tried to trot. Rika did not know Yaadi and Yaadi did not know Rika. She fondly recalled G.K. Chesterton’s *The Donkey*, again. She remembered Lulu’s attempts to stand up and recite it in their class when they were in Standard Six. She had a lump in her throat. Her mind escaped, going back in years.

Then in the classroom, Lulu could not remember all her words. She started to giggle nervously. This was never to be done. It was among the worst things, worse than talking in class, and not having the right books out of the desk, that one could do before Sister Evangelist who was now red with anger. But that was then, Rika was now back to marveling at this line, “When fishes flew and forests walked...” She sang about the day the donkey would remember a different life.

Ah, the donkey’s sweet hour: “There was a shout above my ear, and palms before my feet!” But perhaps the donkey would never learn to protect her freedom as the horse does with a panic stricken gallop. Swallows will wing in the air. All other hooved animals will forever cry in pain in slaughter houses and in pain at work.

Shack pain

Rei was fast asleep in his room in The Gama. He was transported into a long and dark night. His day was night in which he had no memorable dreams.

In her shack in Mathare, Wairi added a little paraffin to the little burner. Paraffin used for cooking now cost more than a dollar, for a litre. Very few families made this money in a week. Wairi lit a burner in her shack. She put some water in a deep pan that was jet black on the

to side and the man behind the dejected donkey whipped it mercilessly to make it move faster because the rain was starting to fall. Rika thought she saw a black cross on the back of the donkey.

“Uuuumu!” Yaadi yelled at the donkey. And the donkey tried to trot. Rika did not know Yaadi and Yaadi did not know Rika. She fondly recalled G.K. Chesterton’s *The Donkey*, again. She remembered Lulu’s attempts to stand up and recite it in their class when they were in Standard Six. She had a lump in her throat. Her mind escaped, going back in years.

Then in the classroom, Lulu could not remember all her words. She started to giggle nervously. This was never to be done. It was among the worst things, worse than talking in class, and not having the right books out of the desk, that one could do before Sister Evangelist who was now red with anger. But that was then, Rika was now back to marveling at this line, “When fishes flew and forests walked...” She sang about the day the donkey would remember a different life.

Ah, the donkey’s sweet hour: “There was a shout above my ear, and palms before my feet!” But perhaps the donkey would never learn to protect her freedom as the horse does with a panic stricken gallop. Swallows will wing in the air. All other hooved animals will forever cry in pain in slaughter houses and in pain at work.

Shack pain

Rei was fast asleep in his room in The Gama. He was transported into a long and dark night. His day was night in which he had no memorable dreams.

In her shack in Mathare, Wairi added a little paraffin to the little burner. Paraffin used for cooking now cost more than a dollar, for a litre. Very few families made this money in a week. Wairi lit a burner in her shack. She put some water in a deep pan that was jet black on the

outside because of soot. When the water boiled, she put in a piece of cold ugali from the night before. She had had the same hard ugali for breakfast for two days. She sat for a few minutes.

She put a little ointment on her forefinger from a small round black and red tin. She rubbed it around her neck and around her upper arms. She repeated this many times. She rubbed her little finger too. She then boiled some hot water, put it in a bucket and dipped her feet in it. She fell asleep with her feet in the bucket. She slept for almost forty minutes. When she awoke, the water was lukewarm. She took a rag and dried her feet and sat on a little sisal and straw mat. She lay down to sleep. She dreamt that she was dancing in a brightly lit up place she had never been to before. No one disturbed her sleep for long. Suddenly, a neighbor knocked at her door furiously. She said she wanted to borrow a little paraffin. Wairi told her she had none. That was what Yaadi knew. Wairi knew that this neighbor was testing her. She knew that her going out could not carry on for too long, for soon, somehow, someone would find out.

She did not keep the money from Rei in the house. She had immediately put it in the Salon Merry- Go- Round. She had seen how many of her colleagues managed school fees and burial funds out of such savings. If Yaadi ever found such money on her, he would kill her.

Wairi fell asleep again but was up abruptly when Yaadi threw the door open calling her names. "You donkey! How could you be fast asleep when your friend has burnt her shack and everyone has run there to put out the fire! Did you plan that fire with her? What was she doing here before she lit up her house?"

"I do not know."

He suddenly kept quiet. Maybe her still and solemn voice had touched his heart or he was just tired.

"The fire has been put off," he said.

He did not tell her about the barrels of the local brew which they had made in a neighboring rural area. He did not tell her it was meant

for a ceremony. He did not tell her that they had hidden about 20 containers of the drink inside the water in the river bank below and deep in the valley, without anyone noticing.

No one else was to know what the donkey was carrying. These things are for men only, according to the law of the gang. Perhaps he was conscious of his cruelty. He gazed at Wairi and felt a rough urge to grab her and draw her close to him but a voice in him shouted at once: 'We are not the Mai Mai of Congo! We know these are not wives, they were never brides, they are our stepping stones until we liberate ourselves! Don't rape them. Don't go to them in bed, they will weaken your stamina for the struggle!' It was the voice of the Leader ringing in his head.

Chopping distance

The loud spurting sounds filled the air. The wake turbulence was tremendous but it ceased as the chopper took off and gathered speed. Nig had called Rei mid-morning and Rika hurried back to town and she was ready in her safari suit. When the chopper took off from Wilson airport, both Rika and Rei were eager to see the landscape. A splash of rusty tin marked the many little brown patches that were the Kibera slums on the ground; Kenya's Soweto. Hidden down there in Kibera were many possibilities, Rika thought. But it was not easy for most to see that. Politicians were exceptional, they knew how to hover and take aim too. Like eagles in the sky looking for food, they saw these opportunities in the slums and other parts of Kenya. The swooped down and snatched. Politics is lucrative almost everywhere but in Kenya, it mints money.

No stranger could guess from up there that there were at least one million people on the ground wondering in the same instance, where they could throw away their plastic papers full of human waste. Rei certainly did not know that.

for a ceremony. He did not tell her that they had hidden about 20 containers of the drink inside the water in the river bank below and deep in the valley, without anyone noticing.

No one else was to know what the donkey was carrying. These things are for men only, according to the law of the gang. Perhaps he was conscious of his cruelty. He gazed at Wairi and felt a rough urge to grab her and draw her close to him but a voice in him shouted at once: 'We are not the Mai Mai of Congo! We know these are not wives, they were never brides, they are our stepping stones until we liberate ourselves! Don't rape them. Don't go to them in bed, they will weaken your stamina for the struggle!' It was the voice of the Leader ringing in his head.

Chopping distance

The loud spurting sounds filled the air. The wake turbulence was tremendous but it ceased as the chopper took off and gathered speed. Nig had called Rei mid-morning and Rika hurried back to town and she was ready in her safari suit. When the chopper took off from Wilson airport, both Rika and Rei were eager to see the landscape. A splash of rusty tin marked the many little brown patches that were the Kibera slums on the ground; Kenya's Soweto. Hidden down there in Kibera were many possibilities, Rika thought. But it was not easy for most to see that. Politicians were exceptional, they knew how to hover and take aim too. Like eagles in the sky looking for food, they saw these opportunities in the slums and other parts of Kenya. The swooped down and snatched. Politics is lucrative almost everywhere but in Kenya, it mints money.

No stranger could guess from up there that there were at least one million people on the ground wondering in the same instance, where they could throw away their plastic papers full of human waste. Rei certainly did not know that.

Wondering where to throw waste in a plastic bag? No. They just flung flying toilets through the holes in the wall that served as windows. And as for water, it was always so scarce for them. They had developed resistance to the worst of water parasites. Yet down Ngong' road great water carrying trailers, painted blue sped down freely and at ease. Those went to the leafy suburbs for sale at 130 \$ each. Young men in the slums and elsewhere in rural villages where rivers had disappeared were consumed with anger, but it was the women who had to find the water for cooking and washing clothes, wherever they could. Sometimes they washed their clothes in gutters. If you saw a man with water on a cart, he was selling it. When he arrived home, he would be expecting his wife to have worked out the magic of how to get water home to the family, for in his mind that would always be her role.

Women here in the slums tried to hold onto crafting baskets but they had so much more to do. There was a girl Rika remembered from Kibera. She was named Jamlia. Jamlia had watched Sarafina the movie about South Africa's struggle over one hundred times. Jamlia kept on saying that she knew she was neither the first nor the last warrior. She knew the warrior songs of her people the Nubians. She had gone back to her roots. She walked, sang and cried as if living in a dream, completely obsessed with the vision of redeeming her people.

Now up in the air, the chopper took a neat turn over the Ngong' Hills. A stretch of a few minutes of turbulence was followed by better stability. Still, it was a bumpy air ride but soon, it was smoother. The hills rolled green down there below them, the tip of the necklace of lakes in the Rift Valley was visible. They came into full view of Lake Naivasha and saw Lake Elementeita rather quickly just beyond. Lake Elementeita looked flat and as if its waters could overflow the lake's edges. It's name meaning 'the dusty place' in Maa language, is hardly a name for a lake but its name reflects the great dust found around the lake especially in some months of the year. Flamingos visited the lake often.

“Do all Kenyans know Maa?”

“We will talk about languages another time.”

Rika explained, “Lake Naivasha and Lake Baringo, further up are fresh water lakes. Naivasha supports a multi-million dollar floriculture industry! But it is drying up!”

“Amazing!”

“Lake Nakuru, is a world renowned biodiversity sanctuary, hosting 450 bird species. It is, some say, the greatest bird spectacle in the world. Bird breaks are very popular there.”

The water down on Nakuru looked pink. It was the flamingos that appeared to cover the edges that from up there looked like a big frill dropped gently on the land. Hiding in there were pelicans too. Dark uninhabited little islands were visible in the rest of the blue lake and sometimes they too were spotted by pink flamingo.

“Such wonderfully diverse flora and fauna! Lake Nakuru has more than 50 species of animals. It is the black rhino’s sanctuary.”

“Wow! You know so much.. I do not think I know our land like that. It does not bore me, please continue.”

“Well, Kenya has over 36,000 known species of animals, plants and micro-organisms! But unfortunately, rivers and even Mount Kenya are endangered! If we do not heed to environmental protection, we will soon have nothing to show for it!”

Rei sat up straight.

Nig sat in different positions in the chopper clicking away with his special cameras. His friend Rich flew the chopper. He was very pleased with that aerial view of Lake Naivasha. They got good close-ups of some rhinos in the water near The Fisherman’s Camp.

Rich was a strange man. He always looked strictly wrapped in his own thoughts. Yet, whenever one looked at him smoking and stroking his pipe before and after a flight, it was clear he let out his thoughts into the air through his pipe. Right now he was wondering if the hippos at the lakeside would be settled. It is as if he thought the hippos knew he

was on his way and would be getting ready for a photograph. He was a curious man. Sometimes, he laughed on his own as certain things came to his mind.

“It’s insulting to have such a quick peep at a wonder of the world! It is a pity we are only at The Mara overnight and back tomorrow! But that is enough time for two game drives, one in the morning and another in the afternoon,” Said Rei to Rika. “We can actually get two. One this afternoon, and the other in the morning before we return. It is only a 45 minutes flight.”

In the evening after the game drive which all three did, Nig explained why another game drive before 16 00 hrs in the evening of the second day would not be useful as it would be too hurried. It was agreed they would all enjoy it better in the morning. On this first evening drive, they only missed one of the Big Five, the leopard. They saw lions, elephant, buffalo and rhino. Nig explained that this was a sign of very good luck and that Lady Luck sometimes turned up despite trials as some of the African animal fables showed! That was all he knew about African Literature.

That evening, it was not surprising that their appetites were so good. It had been a busy day for all of them. Rika was the exception. At home in the village, she had eaten mashed food which had green beans in it. Although it was cooked together with potatoes, the gas from the beans was too much for her. Flying made things worse. She only wanted water to drink and she drunk plenty of it. In the evening she opted only for a couple of beers. Once on their own, Rei told her about his visit to the Nairobi Museum in the morning and they discussed the Sabasaba Defence Force freely. He listened keenly.

In the end, Rei had a simple analysis. Things were tough. One had to cope with a very hard fact. There were two types of police, some loyal to their work as we know it and others loyal to zonal gangs or militias. Not many people knew that just like few knew that there were two types of Sabasaba Defence Brides, some loyal to someone in the day

and never loyal to anyone at night. Money by any means what ever, was the common denominator between many in power. MPs, some bishops and priests, especially some who sold babies abroad, gangs and professionals were not earning a living but making money. Laborers, hawkers and touts would not forever just live to envy them, they would strike back. Confusion reigned. Bishops and preachers who overdressed and made a lot of money too, made the situation even more complex.

No one could tell who belonged to Sabasaba Defence Force just by looking at men or women in the streets. You would think you were looking at a uniformed keeper of law and order only to discover that you were face to face with someone who had put their life on the line for the sake of membership to a gang. Some special squads were set up by those who believed police were still in control.

Photographs

Rika used to ask Babs, a photographer who had worked for The Sabat News for many years for details and photographs of the gang, thinking that one day, they would be able to not only investigate but also publish their stories and photographs.

Babs had been to every place where he thought he could get a good photograph to publish in the best selling daily in Kenya. Remembered by many colleagues for crouching in dangerous places, crawling for that shot after a number of shelters had been razed down by fire in the wee hours of morning in the slums, Babs was a wonder. He was the kind of person who should have received many awards and contracts but most photography jobs went to Nig and Rich. His employers underpaid him.

Babs and Rika had many treasures stored away. They had special photos in their private archive. The pictures were many and varied. Babs was now using a digital camera but before that they were all hard

and never loyal to anyone at night. Money by any means what ever, was the common denominator between many in power. MPs, some bishops and priests, especially some who sold babies abroad, gangs and professionals were not earning a living but making money. Laborers, hawkers and touts would not forever just live to envy them, they would strike back. Confusion reigned. Bishops and preachers who overdressed and made a lot of money too, made the situation even more complex.

No one could tell who belonged to Sabasaba Defence Force just by looking at men or women in the streets. You would think you were looking at a uniformed keeper of law and order only to discover that you were face to face with someone who had put their life on the line for the sake of membership to a gang. Some special squads were set up by those who believed police were still in control.

Photographs

Rika used to ask Babs, a photographer who had worked for The Sabat News for many years for details and photographs of the gang, thinking that one day, they would be able to not only investigate but also publish their stories and photographs.

Babs had been to every place where he thought he could get a good photograph to publish in the best selling daily in Kenya. Remembered by many colleagues for crouching in dangerous places, crawling for that shot after a number of shelters had been razed down by fire in the wee hours of morning in the slums, Babs was a wonder. He was the kind of person who should have received many awards and contracts but most photography jobs went to Nig and Rich. His employers underpaid him.

Babs and Rika had many treasures stored away. They had special photos in their private archive. The pictures were many and varied. Babs was now using a digital camera but before that they were all hard

copies. They treasured the photo of the baby that was named Tinga. The baby got this name after 'Tinga' as they fondly called Raila, the busiest politician in Kenya because he was on a tour of the area as the baby was delivered by a mother without much help. Women rushed to her assistance and came out saying that Raila had been born again. Tinga! Tinga! Tinga! Tinga has come home! They shouted. The baby cried as it received its name.

Tinga the politician had run straight to Mathare after two gangs had fought, each one saying it was representing its community. He spoke about struggling to save the entire nation and the fight stopped. It was an election year. He had stepped off the plane and asked his driver to go straight from the airport to Mathare slums. This was covered by all media as a highly unusual move. He consoled the people whom he said had lost everything they had and could not afford to lose their dignity.

The people in the slums listened keenly as he spoke. He spoke about people treating themselves like kings even in the midst of material squalor. He said they had to move fast whenever a small fire began to avoid a complete raze down of the entire slum. They had to move as fast as ambulances and fire brigades do when a main city hotel emits three wisps of dark smoke. They had to be their own security and life insurance, he insisted.

Queried by journalists as to what he meant by this, he said that the City Fathers, who had long forgotten mothers, had not created good access roads to all of Mathare so that fire fighters and ambulances—which were hard to get even in the better parts of the city, had poor access. Babs crouched in different angles and took his photographs as Raila spoke to the women who told him he had been born again. Babs took a new photo of baby Tinga every year after that. He said he wanted to follow-up the child's life.

Rika always wanted many photos of police. She said she wanted to compare their stories with the story written in the pupils of their eyes. Babs knew that most cops in the force were matched with another, so

that it was as if each one had an identical twin. Few knew of the look-alikes cleverly planted by the gang. There would be a gang member shadowing every policeman in all his work in the city. There was no asking questions to police and the people thought they saw one person all the time, when in fact, they dealt with a double.

Nothing was working and the Kenyan security invested in a new squad tasked with getting rid of Sabasaba Defence Force. KuickKuic it was called and it was the image of the part of the Central Police Force that worked with the government. But the Sabasaba Defence Force infiltrated KuickKuic. Babs had noticed that the government was using his pictures to deduct who was who in the Sabasaba Defence Force. He had become a smart investigator on his own terms. Crouching, he snapped various photos of the feet of the people he suspected were Sabasaba Defence Force. Nobody suspected he knew anything about Sabasaba Defence. He was the only one in town who knew that the KUickKuick had also made each cop suspected to be in the Sabasaba Defence Force a twin brother so that when you saw one, you thought you had seen the other. Some of the cops who were loyal to the gang feigned affection and made their counterparts good friends. They spoke freely with one another. In the end, no one could tell who was who.

Where identities are sealed, names begin to become a bother and people pretend they are brothers talking to one another without really knowing one another. But between one cop and the other, Babs could see the subtle differences like the little dark line on the face of one and not the other. He would notice little marks and keep all these things to himself. He kept his photos carefully. He always told his friends that there were many Kenyas in Kenya and that the world deceived itself that there was only one. He had his insights all right. He and Rika kept these photos and he entered many others into competitions.

He told Rika many details about the gang. Rika shared all that she knew over many drinks that night. Rei was mesmerized. They agreed that filming the group would be too complex but not impossible. If

they used their connections wisely, they would manage. Rei swore he would do it someday in a way that it had never been done before, but that task was not for this visit.

After some time, Rika could not even move her lips to speak. When she went to her room, Rika thought how wonderful it would be if she could work on even more challenging tasks. She took consolation in remembering the book she had written over years. She fell asleep very fast that night. She dreamt of the ramshackle salon *matatu* car she had ridden in back from Deiya to the main road. The car turned into a chopper. It was flying and rattling. In her dream, it would fly very high and then come very close to the ground.

Her dream did not spare her agony. The lakes below were not full of water. No, they were red, full of blood. They were no longer the peaceful patches of blue kind water she had seen earlier. The vegetation in the dry patches was burnt out. She gasped. And then the lakes turned blue again in her dream. A donkey brayed loud and long. It bathed in the soil on the ground and got up. She awoke suddenly as if she was acting in a movie and the director had shouted: "Cut!" She was happy to remember where she was and to feel so alive and engaged.

* * * * *

Contrasts

Gusts of fresh air went against their faces and deep into their lungs. Rei and Rika tried to speak but they could not hear one another well. At the crack of dawn, the game drive was fantastic. Nig's Lady Luck was right in front of their eyes in less than twenty minutes of driving. There she was, a slinking young leopard moving like a magic cloak in all its glory, retreating from her nocturnal activities. They could not believe they were also looking at a pack of cheetahs nearby. For two hours they enjoyed driving past leafy bush.

they used their connections wisely, they would manage. Rei swore he would do it someday in a way that it had never been done before, but that task was not for this visit.

After some time, Rika could not even move her lips to speak. When she went to her room, Rika thought how wonderful it would be if she could work on even more challenging tasks. She took consolation in remembering the book she had written over years. She fell asleep very fast that night. She dreamt of the ramshackle salon *matatu* car she had ridden in back from Deiya to the main road. The car turned into a chopper. It was flying and rattling. In her dream, it would fly very high and then come very close to the ground.

Her dream did not spare her agony. The lakes below were not full of water. No, they were red, full of blood. They were no longer the peaceful patches of blue kind water she had seen earlier. The vegetation in the dry patches was burnt out. She gasped. And then the lakes turned blue again in her dream. A donkey brayed loud and long. It bathed in the soil on the ground and got up. She awoke suddenly as if she was acting in a movie and the director had shouted: "Cut!" She was happy to remember where she was and to feel so alive and engaged.

* * * * *

Contrasts

Gusts of fresh air went against their faces and deep into their lungs. Rei and Rika tried to speak but they could not hear one another well. At the crack of dawn, the game drive was fantastic. Nig's Lady Luck was right in front of their eyes in less than twenty minutes of driving. There she was, a slinking young leopard moving like a magic cloak in all its glory, retreating from her nocturnal activities. They could not believe they were also looking at a pack of cheetahs nearby. For two hours they enjoyed driving past leafy bush.

After sighting many elephants in herds, it was marvelous to go floating in a balloon as if one had bidden goodbye all the tough things of the world. They saw the top of acacia trees which from above looked like umbrellas. So smooth were they from up there where it was impossible to see their thorns. The rest of the world spread out as if in a painting where giraffe walked tall between trees as zebras grazed behind them. The gazelles were not too far as all the animals grazed in one herd. Rich took many pictures. Rika and Rei too clicked away. Rika could hardly wait to show hers to Uhai and Hariri.

It was surprising how fast the morning went. Before long, the mysterious Nig was calling them to the Mara Airstrip. He was ready to leave. The flight back was longer since the wind was rough over the Rift Valley. Rika was delighted to be back. Her children danced to meet her each time she returned. They had turned this into a family custom.

Night in flight

Rei hit the streets eagerly that night. The flight, it seemed, had got him on an incredible high. He arranged a meeting with Pica fast, after enjoying a cold beer. He could hardly wait to ask questions when she arrived.

“When do they hold their festival and what do they do?” he asked Pica.

“Well, I know they must have a bleating goat and some ‘mourning’ chicken, which are slaughtered,” She whispered, looking behind her.

“Are you afraid?”

“I always am, no matter where I go.”

“Oooh! I hope am not asking too many things.”

“There are also special rituals, signs and words for one’s identity. I hear Yaadi singing them sometimes. He often sings, ” I am Yaadi, *thaa*i, CheWachege, Yaadi, and I was cut in the river, I fear nothing, I have

After sighting many elephants in herds, it was marvelous to go floating in a balloon as if one had bidden goodbye all the tough things of the world. They saw the top of acacia trees which from above looked like umbrellas. So smooth were they from up there where it was impossible to see their thorns. The rest of the world spread out as if in a painting where giraffe walked tall between trees as zebras grazed behind them. The gazelles were not too far as all the animals grazed in one herd. Rich took many pictures. Rika and Rei too clicked away. Rika could hardly wait to show hers to Uhai and Hariri.

It was surprising how fast the morning went. Before long, the mysterious Nig was calling them to the Mara Airstrip. He was ready to leave. The flight back was longer since the wind was rough over the Rift Valley. Rika was delighted to be back. Her children danced to meet her each time she returned. They had turned this into a family custom.

Night in flight

Rei hit the streets eagerly that night. The flight, it seemed, had got him on an incredible high. He arranged a meeting with Pica fast, after enjoying a cold beer. He could hardly wait to ask questions when she arrived.

“When do they hold their festival and what do they do?” he asked Pica.

“Well, I know they must have a bleating goat and some ‘mourning’ chicken, which are slaughtered,” She whispered, looking behind her.

“Are you afraid?”

“I always am, no matter where I go.”

“Oooh! I hope am not asking too many things.”

“There are also special rituals, signs and words for one’s identity. I hear Yaadi singing them sometimes. He often sings, ” I am Yaadi, *thaa*i, CheWachege, Yaadi, and I was cut in the river, I fear nothing, I have

sworn and taken an oath, in life and death!" She added. She glanced fearfully over her shoulder.

"People skinned alive and killed and made into 'mzungus' as people said, and displayed in strange rural places, is that the work of the Sabasaba Defence Force?"

"I do not know. But I have heard Yaadi often speaking about 'mzungu'"

"What does he say?"

"He says it is the mzungu in all of us who betrayed us!"

"Oh!"

"But no mzungu was ever killed by them."

"No. I do not know!"

"They do things that make us confused and others we do not know."

Pica told Rei that she had written down something for him. She warned him of how this group changed fast and left police and people holding paraphanelia which they thought could identify them and which the gang discarded the moment part of the police thought they got the puzzle right. Just as she put some cash swiftly into her handbag, she heard the sound of fast moving boots hitting the ground with their unmistakable clon clon sound. Suddenly, two cops came and peeped in and walked out and returned in seconds. They went straight up to Rei.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, am having a drink?"

"Where do you come from?"

Pica winks at him lightly and he knows he must not give a correct answer to the question. She dreaded the sound of clinging handcuffs, a sound she sometimes heard even in her dreams. To her it was not a click sound, it was QuickQuick!

"Kenya is a wonderful country! Naivasha, Nakuru, Nairobi... and tonight I drink for tomorrow..." , Rei answers the police calmly.

He remembers that word which Rika had taught him, "*afandi*", a colonial word that apparently made Kenyan police happy when it was

used because it meant complete submission to their power. Rei thought that he could use it now and was dragging it out of his tired memory. He did not know he was not dealing with an ordinary Kenyan policeman.

“Is there anything the matter afeeendi?”

“Yes. These girls. This girl. What are you doing with this girl?”

“Which girl, affenzi?”

“Don’t try to be smart or to impress me, am not one of those regular Kenyan cops you know! And you know the girl I am talking about.”

Rei smiled at him. It worked for a few minutes. Surprise and calm filled the policeman’s eyes and he was already a little relaxed. But suddenly, he was furious again. It was as if some contrary message was triggered in his brain. He now looked angry and unimpressed. He walked away in disgust. Rei sensed grave danger in these sudden changes. He held his breath as the armed man deliberated his steps; one at a time. His manner of walking was a stamp of authority. His own authority not that of a force he worked for, but that of his own conviction.

Pica left swiftly after the cop. A cup of hot coffee is what Rei felt he badly needed. Something told him he would be better off having it at The Gama. He called the taxi that had driven him from the airport on Friday and left. He had been told to trust this taxi driver by Rika and so he did. One Sunday looked like it had been a whole week.

Wairi’s dream

Inside her body, Wairi was aching with fear and the desire to leave her pain behind her, would this ever be? She wished she could pour out her thoughts to a friend but she knew the risk. Wairi and the Donkey, the Donkey and Wairi. She wanted an opportunity to escape her misery. For that, she could give her life. But it seemed that instead her misery was closing in on her and strangling life out of her. She really was at this

used because it meant complete submission to their power. Rei thought that he could use it now and was dragging it out of his tired memory. He did not know he was not dealing with an ordinary Kenyan policeman.

“Is there anything the matter afeeendi?”

“Yes. These girls. This girl. What are you doing with this girl?”

“Which girl, affenzi?”

“Don’t try to be smart or to impress me, am not one of those regular Kenyan cops you know! And you know the girl I am talking about.”

Rei smiled at him. It worked for a few minutes. Surprise and calm filled the policeman’s eyes and he was already a little relaxed. But suddenly, he was furious again. It was as if some contrary message was triggered in his brain. He now looked angry and unimpressed. He walked away in disgust. Rei sensed grave danger in these sudden changes. He held his breath as the armed man deliberated his steps; one at a time. His manner of walking was a stamp of authority. His own authority not that of a force he worked for, but that of his own conviction.

Pica left swiftly after the cop. A cup of hot coffee is what Rei felt he badly needed. Something told him he would be better off having it at The Gama. He called the taxi that had driven him from the airport on Friday and left. He had been told to trust this taxi driver by Rika and so he did. One Sunday looked like it had been a whole week.

Wairi’s dream

Inside her body, Wairi was aching with fear and the desire to leave her pain behind her, would this ever be? She wished she could pour out her thoughts to a friend but she knew the risk. Wairi and the Donkey, the Donkey and Wairi. She wanted an opportunity to escape her misery. For that, she could give her life. But it seemed that instead her misery was closing in on her and strangling life out of her. She really was at this

moment like a tightly closed bottle. She desired with all her heart to one day open the bottle top and flow out like a good beer or champagne. She knew champagne when she saw it. It flowed happily out. She loved the sound of a popping cork, the three times she had heard it in her life. It made her feel warm and fulfilled even if she did not share the chilled drink. Perhaps a cork is the home of a happy dream.

The taxi driver was happy to see Rei and he sensed Rei was in a hurry. He thought that after dropping him to the hotel Rei would probably call him to ask him to take him to some other place, perhaps back the airport.

He drove up through Kenyatta Avenue he explained, to avoid getting into trouble in town, he took Uhuru Highway and meant to go up past what is often referred to as the University roundabout. But at the bus stop opposite Anniversary Towers, a cop waving him down madly, suddenly sprung up from a hedge that separated the Jewish Synagogue from the main road. This was a place that most Nairobians did not notice much. The cop would not listen to Rei's pleas of innocence. He issued his commands harshly. He told the taxi driver to go straight to the Seen All Police Station a few meters to the left down the road. That is the same turning that the taxi driver would have used to take Rei lower down to The Gama. The cop would not listen. He talked into a noisy walkie talkie that went on and off abruptly as he jumped into the front seat next to the driver.

Rei had no alternative. He was getting driven into the Seen All Police Station, he was in a panic. What now? He wondered. He was so surprised he did not think of calling Rika. He stepped into the Station, to find someone on the ready with handcuffs for him. But he noticed the moves were studied and planned. For a critical keen eye, the mischief dripped from every word and move. The taxi driver was ordered to drive off. As he did it, he was only thinking about money he paid every month to the police to be protected for using his brother's driver's licence and for being a taxi driver. He vanished from the Seen All Police Station

fast and Rei was thrown into a stinking cell. He started coughing as soon as the door to the cell was opened. His nose started running immediately. There was a stink of ammonia already mixed with human waste coming to his nostrils.

A few minutes after, the Crime Officer Luka who was known as the throat clearer- he could be heard snorting and clearing his throat from a mile away- was loudly asking for an update of events at his Station. He received details from an intimidated voice.

They said of Crime Officer Luka that if you did not hear his voice getting cleared or if he did not talk, someone was dying as he beat them to pulp at the Station. When he kept quiet, all police in the Station stayed ears cocked like those of gazelles sniffing out the air for a hungry lion hunting them down. The Crime Officer was nicknamed Wathogi, a name adapted from warthog.

Suddenly, the arresting cop did not have as much energy as he had shown in the arrest. He said to his boss that he was just doing what he had to do.

“To do wharaat?” C.O. Luka snorted. “Who is that person you have thrown into the cells so fast before he could even deposit his valuables in the police safe?”

“Sir, that is one of those *Jungu* drug peddlers.”

“Any exhibits?”

“Nor Sir!”

“What did you see?”

“That he is out with girls too late in the night, sir!”

“Do you have an exhibit? You need more details before you can throw people into the cells! I have told you many times that we are not going to work like that forever! The cells are full!” He asked for Rei to be brought to his office.

“You are arrested?”

“Yes Sir!”

“Why?”

"I do not know. I am only visiting Kenya and am leaving on Friday night. I am not a drug peddler. Tomorrow, I am planning to visit some caves in Turkana and I fly back to Nairobi in the evening! I am not the person you are looking for!"

"Well, I can't be sure, young man! The fact that you are planning to go to caves in Turkana is not reason enough to prove that you are innocent. That I am asking questions about your arrest does not make you innocent!" Said the Crime Officer.

"But no crimes have been filed against me," Said Rei.

"What I need is your passport for identification as well as the contact address of the hotel you are staying in."

"I have a driver's license here for identification sir, and my passport is just down the road at The Hotel Gama ."

"What are you to do now?"

"Sir, The Gama ... I ... "

"Oh, that is very close, get into the car and let's take you down there!"

"Yes, then I will show you the passport once we get there," said Rei who could not hide his surprise at what he felt was a good turn of events.

In three minutes they were in the hotel and he showed all his identification to Crime Officer Luka who apologized on behalf of the arresting cop. He told Rei he had been suspected of drug peddling and human trafficking.

"Thank you Sir!" "Such a big charge would have seen me in trouble for many years. And it is not true of course!" Said a grateful Rei who had not yet met the real Wathogi.

"Yes, I know it is not true and I know why it was happening. I am investigating the policeman that arrested you. He has been behaving strangely of late, and we have more problems than we can handle in this force, I can assure you!" Said Luka who looked like he was about to drive off. Rei could not believe it when suddenly he whipped out a

form full of names of people who had contributed to his son's hospital bill. They were all foreigners. "I do not take less than two hundred dollars! I prefer it in the green currency. Read there!" He snorted at Rei. "Hurry up! I have no time to waste!". Rei reluctant at heart, took out two hundred dollars in two notes.

As Rei dosed off finally after reading magazines, he tried to fight the feeling that he had been stripped of something more than the dollars. He wondered at the taxi driver. He thought he was his friend. Had he delivered him into the hands of his enemies?

Stories embedded

Rei slept heavily till late the next morning. Rika turned up as usual fresh and smart in her casual jeans and a T-shirt with paws of a lion on it. She eagerly but anxiously listened to Rei's story and urged him to take extreme care.

"You never fully know what these police are up to until the end, it may not even be about money but they will take it in the process."

"When the Crime Officer does that?"

"What is crime here, Rei? It is obvious C.O. Luka has a different definition?"

Just then, Rei's phone rang.

"Hello!"

"It is me, Taxi man. Are you alright? I am sorry. I am so afraid of police. I just left you."

"It is fine. I will call you when I need you."

As soon as he replaced his phone, they agreed to make arrangements with a different taxi driver. Rei went to the taxi bay near The Gama and arranged with one driver to take him to the Nairobi National Park in the afternoon. He first went to the Nairobi National Archives and looked at local newspapers and some publications for three hours. Early

form full of names of people who had contributed to his son's hospital bill. They were all foreigners. "I do not take less than two hundred dollars! I prefer it in the green currency. Read there!" He snorted at Rei. "Hurry up! I have no time to waste!". Rei reluctant at heart, took out two hundred dollars in two notes.

As Rei dosed off finally after reading magazines, he tried to fight the feeling that he had been stripped of something more than the dollars. He wondered at the taxi driver. He thought he was his friend. Had he delivered him into the hands of his enemies?

Stories embedded

Rei slept heavily till late the next morning. Rika turned up as usual fresh and smart in her casual jeans and a T-shirt with paws of a lion on it. She eagerly but anxiously listened to Rei's story and urged him to take extreme care.

"You never fully know what these police are up to until the end, it may not even be about money but they will take it in the process."

"When the Crime Officer does that?"

"What is crime here, Rei? It is obvious C.O. Luka has a different definition?"

Just then, Rei's phone rang.

"Hello!"

"It is me, Taxi man. Are you alright? I am sorry. I am so afraid of police. I just left you."

"It is fine. I will call you when I need you."

As soon as he replaced his phone, they agreed to make arrangements with a different taxi driver. Rei went to the taxi bay near The Gama and arranged with one driver to take him to the Nairobi National Park in the afternoon. He first went to the Nairobi National Archives and looked at local newspapers and some publications for three hours. Early

afternoon he spent some time at the City Market where he sat in a kiosk for lunch. He enjoyed the waitress's full attention and joined in a conversation some young men had with him about his country and theirs.

The poolside at The Gama was not too cold that night. Pica sat clear eyed looking at Rei in the eye. They both had warm jackets on.

"The rituals, yes, and songs."

"Did you ever attend any?"

"No. I can never be allowed to."

"Are you very scared of these people? Why did you agree to stay with Yaadi?"

"Well, I am very afraid. But where we come from, there are many of them. They are children of mothers that we know. Yaadi? I was forced to stay with him. You know I cannot tell anybody that he is a member. Only other members know."

"What does he eat?"

"Mostly, he eats out. But he loves yam. He always brings some for me to cook."

"But you can't eat that everyday.."

"No. We eat ugali, fresh and old.."

"Does he have another wife?"

"No."

"Did he go to school?"

"Yes. He passed his exams. He is very clever."

"Does he go to church on Sundays?"

"No."

"Does he get visitors at home?"

"Only some other members come."

"Do you get visitors?"

"Never. If I did, he would beat me. But he allows me to speak to the women who live close to our house."

Wairi took her last soda and left. She had good money. This consoled her and this time, no one was going to demand a part of it.

Turkana

The following morning, the flight to north western area of Kenya was early and they arrived there at exactly 7.45 am on Tuesday morning. Nig was less nervous on this flight. He enjoyed the green scenery which fast turned into dry grasslands from up there as if he was seeing it for the first time. Once in that dry land, they rode in the District Officer's (D.O) Land Rover for some kilometers before they reached the caves they were looking for. The D.O was Nig's friend. Nig drove freely and happily in this land in his friend's old Land Rover.

“On these rocks, you see here, is written our history and the history of humankind. This is Turkana. Here there is rock art that is connected with Kakapel near Mount Elgon, the site which gained national recognition in 2005 is. Of course, due to our transport system, many Kenyans have died without ever visiting this. But some can at least reach the museum near Mount Elgon on the border with Uganda. But I worry too, that not many of us truly know our history and even geography. But in ancient times people travelled more even though they feared wild animals. People travel less today, they fear other human beings. Mount Elgon, as I mentioned in Mara has a deep history of violence and pain too. We need to learn so much. Many of us do not know our local birds by their names in our national languages, not even some birds that fly right up to our doors. Our tongues are muted; our languages have lost their power and beauty as have beads that have blood on them. The village folk usually have a name for everything. But the city children do not know these names in Kiswahili, English, Sheng or mother tongue. They might even boldly ask you why you think they should know them. They do not like to know the village of their origin a place their parents are already afraid of sometimes. Who was to know which powers would hold them down if they went there? They still feared superstition. Witchcraft was real in some areas,” Rika said.

“I can understand that! It is only natural. Few talk about how witchcraft is practised in our so called advanced countries! “ Rei exclaimed. “Many of us like to pretend how different we are from other people!” he added.

“Oh, yes, some in Africa would say you do not even sneeze, to put it mildly,” added Rika.

“We are estranged from birds and trees in our environments and from our ancestors too! They drew geometric designs on these rocks of animals such as elephants. This rock site has pre-historic art from between 4,000 years and 200 years back. Turkana area here is the land of the Iteso. A great people!” Said Rika.

Suddenly, the quiet Nig chimed in.

“ I must come back to live here some day in the future, but that after exploring Elgon!”

Rika looked at him knowingly. There were not many people in Kenya who could do what Nig did. He could fly, drive and live in the remotest corners of Kenya and still be partly secure. When he went home finally, he would not find hungry chicken clucking all over and children crying at home. He had none. He would ride his horse around a beautiful neighborhood. He would not have to work harder, his workers on the land in Nairobi suburbs where he only planted herbs would look after everything.

Nig was fascinated as always.

“These are giraffe, elephant and lion engravings. Off the cliffs surrounding Kalacha lake people jumped to go and hunt. Their images are there.. “ explained Nig. He told Rei that next time he came to Kenya, he could fly him down to Lake Chala in Taveta.

“Now, even if you have not been to Kisumu, Eldoret and Mombasa, you have been to places many Kenyans have never been to, and am afraid, may never go. On your next visit you will enjoy seeing the other towns,” Said Rika.

The afternoon withered on as they walked from the caves. Nig took photographs of fishermen and women using fishing baskets. Again, he wanted photos of hippos in the lake and his camera kept clicking away. They drove long through the desert places as Nig took photos of the women on the road without their consent. He talked about the beauty in people and land all at once. It was a wonder how they survived he kept saying. Click, click, click, Nig went again. There were many beautiful girls on the roadsides. Some stood as if posing near shrubs whose green leaves were covered with heavy dust.

Rika explained how they would be married off young and mutilated in their private parts as a ritual that marked their entry into 'adulthood'. Rei cringed.

"Was that done to you too, if you don't mind me asking Rika?" he asked.

"No. My mother rebelled against it. But it was done to her."

"Phew! I would hate to think that it was still being done all over the country," Said Rei, "because then there would be little hope of it ever stopping. I am glad your people stopped."

"Well, it is more complex than most people know. Have you seen a map of female genital cutting of the world? Have you read there are different types and the worst types are mainly in Africa in one big belt of the equator and to its north and south? There are entire peoples who never did this to their girls. That includes some Bantu people too. It just did not fit within their customs," Rika said.

"Do you know if it is practiced by Muslims?"

"Again, only some. Look at the FGC map. It does not include many countries where Muslims are a majority in population. True, it came through the Nile and it was practiced 2,300 years BC, but there is much more we do not know."

"Male circumcision is done by many races."

"There are some who do not do it Afrika. But male circumcision is an accepted tradition. Using the same unsterilized knife led to infections,

including HIV but now there is more education about that. It is even said that studies show that male circumcision helps protect men from HIV virus infections and so those who did not do it in the past now are doing it.”

“The trouble is every time we say something about Afrika people think it is the same everywhere and it is simple. People even in high places do not know Afrika even when they have spent time on some of her beaches. I remember a famous model who failed in a beauty contest because she said she had never heard of Chad when I was at University,” Said Rika.

“Oh, I know plenty about that! Ignorance is glory in advanced countries where people have more computers and everything: shelter, health, electric power, food.. more than they need. It is like that with us!” Rei said.

“The shocking thing is that even our so called more advanced people, have not fully stopped mutilating women physically. They do it in big cities when they are abroad sometimes. In my area, it was said they all stopped. No. They have not all stopped mutilating women. It is sometimes done in private. Cultural matters are very deeply engraved in the minds of the people and one generation away from such a practice is too close. Slipping back to it is easy. In some cases, they justify mutilation of women through religion, but the practice is older than some religions.”

The journey back was quiet. They were thirsty with a thirst that no water or iced drink could take away. This thirst seemed determined to hang on to their throats as much as the dust they saw on the roads in the north hugging the few leaves that were visible, choking them.

At the terrace behind the dining room at The Gama , the two waiters were so engrossed in their conversation about human rights activists who had been arrested. They could not see Rika trying to attract their attention. It was the end of a difficult day.

Paradise Lost

“Paradise Lost!” said Rei.

“It is not a long way from here!”

They turned into coffee plantations and drove through the many curves. In a short while they were in Paradise Lost. The caves at Paradise Lost discovered in the 90s attracted many visitors. The puzzle was they had been always so near and yet so far.

As Rika would say, “We are always near something unusual even when all looks so normal. The story is that perhaps the Mau Mau hid in these caves.”

On the way back, Rika noticed a group of young men in a part of the coffee plantation. She was certain that there was something going on down there by the banks of the river, but the beautiful ride to Limuru beckoned. It was time to see tea plantations in that area. As well as that, Rika knew she would want Rei to pass by a village called Kamirithu as well as visit the market in Limuru town.

They had tea at a homely country hotel owned by a politician of Kenyatta days- and as no one seemed to retire from politics- he had represented the people since the early sixties, soon after independence. Rika often wondered if it was only the Kenyan politician who was obsessed with owning hotels. Well, in a country where tourism is the highest income earner, politicians perched on the best trees. One day, she hoped, people based tourism would win the day. Entire villages, she said, would own hotels communally.

It was alleged politicians had connections with some of the local gangs. It was reported that a former Member of Parliament declared that he took a strange solemn oath at Modern Inn and all were lost for words. The Inn was also owned by a politician. The gang members apparently stood by to see to it that he said all what he had to say in the oath. This Member of Parliament was a pope in a local church. He

silenced himself after this event. The dance of the snake had reached the pinnacle of the church.

Rika enjoyed the cup of tea, and the evening drive along tea plantations towards Limuru through Tigonu very much. They spoke about Rei's work in Geneva. They discussed recent developments in cinema all over the world. In between, there was the history of the Bata shoe factory which they passed, the railway in Limuru, schools and training colleges for girls. By the time Rika reached Kamirithu, they were both exhausted. Rika drove back through the Nakuru highway. She dropped Rei and immediately returned her friend's car to the parking of the United Kenya Club.

It was easy for Rei to understand tensions in the country. He had passed through the poor areas so near the homes of the wealthy everywhere. It was so in Kiambu, Nairobi, Kisumu and Mombasa too, he knew. It is always the same. He saw it. Darkness had set in where preachers said they had light. Huge farms and houses and then many shacks beside them. People would do anything- live or die- just to be seen by as many as possible in large and expensive vehicles such as Mercedes, the Hummer and Prados. Two wheels with spokes and a seat protected from rain by a plastic cover were alien to middle class workers here. You could see a few people on bikes, mainly men in the city, but so many were killed as the roads had no bike paths. Where was the educated bicycle class in this country? Rei longed to go to the slums and see much more for himself, but Rika would not hear any of that. She had helped him out and kept him safe. Whenever Martel called her, she reassured him of that. She did not understand how deeply this desire gnawed at Rei's heart.

She was exhausted and she thought he was too. That night fell on Rei like a warm and welcome blanket; begging him to snuggle more.

Rei told Rika he planned to enjoy the next two days in town. He did not tell her that he wanted to squeeze every minute of the trip to the

last hour for full contact with the people. The question on Rei's mind was to push every hour to the limit. He had to do more. If one chose to think of life as fresh juice in the sun in a clean long glass ready to be drunk, Rei would be the thorough juice extractor. He could squeeze out the stuff of life; glean the best out of everything.

Rei had two days before his midnight flight. He could not possibly tell Rika he was considering going further in towards Mount Kenya and that a Mathare Valley visit was a must. He really had to do something.

All this time, he had been unhappy with the idea of returning to Geneva before visiting at least one of the two main Nairobi slums. He had learnt a lot about Mathare from 'Pica' and Rika. He longed to set his feet there. He felt he had to walk in the rural areas where maize and beans grew. The allure of Afrika for him was never going to be for the sun and the shining coastal sands only. The thought that he really had to do this, begun the day after he arrived. He could not get it off his mind even after flying over so much of Kenya. It was compelling. He decided to go back to 'his' cab driver. He had not felt at ease with the one who took him to the National Park with some of Wairi's night girl friends whom he found chatting outside in the gardens of The Gama.

The new drive had laughed too much with the girls and talked to them in languages he did not understand, leaving him out of the conversation. Fundi would take him to Murang'a. He would take him to 'The Peak Murang'a Adventure', as he called it. But he was going to take care. This time he gave that cab driver some 35\$ to get him a priest's cassock. No girls in the ride. He was going to travel incognito. He was also going to change the car they would use. He was going to pay the taxi driver an agreed sum for driving for the day. They would hire a self drive. When they got one for 25\$ for a whole day, then Rei realized how expensive the other taxi rides had been.

Long coats

When Rei saw Fundi the cab driver arrive with a bundle at The Gama, he was delighted. It was only 9.30 am in the morning. The car was outside and Fundi reassured him it was in perfect shape.

“I would only like to explain to you one thing,” said Fundi.

“What is it?”

This is a cassock but the money was sufficient for a *kanzu* and a fez. I figured out that you were better off in a *kanzu* for this trip, than in a Roman collar. You see, you just want to look different and not like you are on a safari or on a preaching mission. You are safer there looking like that.

“I wanted to look like a recently arrived parish priest or a preacher of sorts.”

“Risky. Bad. I come from Murang’a and I know that there are some young men there who are very interested in visitors. I know that of late, I have heard they do not like white persons. With these on, you look like Arab man, after your days in the sun.”

“Oh, do I?”

“Those young men, they belong to a gang that says it is going to reclaim Kenya’s freedom by firstly discarding all western ways including religion as preached from the Bible. Do you want to go there looking like a walking Bible? We do not talk about them. Only my crazy sister, Joyful Jayne, preaches to them. But you see, they do not believe in the word proclaimed through woman. They just listen to her, they say, because she helps their day to get dark fast. They have rules for women. They want all women circumcised. They do not want them to wear trousers and they complain a lot about them. They complain that women wear artificial hair, lips, high heels, flat sandals, penciled eyes and colors on their faces. But once police said the gang did not like women in trousers, their Leader appeared in public with a woman clad in tight jeans. Their Leader said all the killings and violent things they were blamed of were done by the government. Not they.”

“What are they looking for?”

“They say for justice”

“Others say they have changed and they just want money.”

“You, what do you say they want?”

“I think it is money and power. But I think they are no longer one. You can see them like a dragon with many heads. It is not easy to tell what they want and no one really understands. Most people are too frightened to even ask. Identity is what makes us understand things and theirs changes often. Among them, there are some who are hungry for the marvelous values Afrikans lost...values that we lost with the coming of *Musungu* ways, eh! That is what they say.”

“But is it not funny that they are saying this after almost fifty years of independence and a hundred years of Christianity and more years of Islam?”

“Perhaps they are organized for something by more powerful people. That is what we the others think. They are used. In this place if you do not watch out.. you are used quickly!”

“Would they tell us things if we went and asked them?” Rei asked. The cab driver had no idea how much Rei already knew but Rei was delighted with his insights. Just then his phone received a message. It was a news update and he read it eagerly. “Police in Githurai shoot dead five suspected Mungiki adherents.” The taxi driver heard it on the radio whose volume was very low. He shivered with horror. Rei also felt fear creep up his back.

“What is Moongeiki?” Rei asked.

“It is a secret organization,” the driver sitting up quickly and clearing his throat.

“What is the proof for membership?”

“No one knows except the members.”

“I was saying that perhaps they are organized for something.”

“They do not like anyone to ask questions about them!”

“That is dangerous.”

“But it is the way it is!”

“Should we try to find out anyway?”

“Maybe cleverly with my nephew whom I hear belongs to their group but no one really knows or dares ask him.”

“You discuss religion with him after we eat my sister’s famous chapattis. You will get some ideas.”

“OK. I will see how far it goes.”

“Okeiii. I will help you,” added Fundi.

“Don’t expect a confession or anything. These people are mysterious and they do not fear death! Weeeee! They do not fear death! They do not fear death! My sister is really frightened and she says she has washed herself, her clothes and including all her underwear, her walls and goats and sheep and chicken with the blood of the ram.”

“What ram?”

“The holy ram!”

“Oh, you mean the Lamb of God?”

“Yes!”

“I know police kill them, but them, whom do they kill?”

“Betrayers.”

“But how do police know them?”

“They do not .. no one does. Those shot dead were not their members.”

“Oho.... You must not tell anyone what am doing!”

“I won’t, once I agreed to bring you the dress and then to come with you, I became a part of your adventure.”

In the four wheel drive Rava 4, Rei and Fundi arrived in Murang’a town and went off to some local shops in Karanga. That is where Fundi came from.

Rova, an old friend of Fundi’s joined them and they shared some *chai na karanga* . Rova talked a lot. He used euphemisms even in his mother tongue to talk about the gang.

Rei would not have understood his constant reference to '*me ituri ni ma cokaga!*' which means those we think are far, like at the end of the world sometimes return. But Rei was sharp enough to catch the similarity between *me ituri* and *Muturi* the driver's second name which he had seen on his driving licence. He thought they were just mentioning names, but they were warning one another about being too loud on the group or assuming they would not be heard.

There was great confusion as the gang seemed to have evolved into a money hungry group. They were ready to work with the highest bidder from Kenya or outside its borders. Was that just one of its arms that was ready for money or had the whole group been weakened by material gains betraying one another? This group extorted money from all. They became gangs for hire.

It was said a genuine part of the group survived and was always looking for change, but nobody was sure. Some said the members were children of Kenya's Mau Mau who had not received any benefits but the old Mau Mau men and women still alive disowned them and said they were belittling the struggle for freedom. No one knew for certain what was going on. The gang members knew that they were powerful as politicians in search of popular support sought them out.

They knew what business people wanted and what they were scared of most. They wanted money, they feared insecurity completely. The gang would give some of them security and get money from them. They would look for women with diamonds in their mouths and make them speak. Kidnapping became part of the game. Mainstream churches that had sowed their seed a hundred years ago in this land, worried they had nothing to show for a century of evangelization. The youth ridiculed Christianity. Priests knelt before this youth beseeching God to help them to conform. The group true in spirit rose high like a powerful ray of the sun hitting the disappearing snowcap on Mount Kenya. Most people who wanted change understood this youth, others were angry saying that they too were hungry, but would not kill or extort money.

The priest's prayers were not answered. Scholars in their cool ways said the authorities needed to acknowledge the mili-gangs and stop living in denial. Some felt much compassion on some of these young men who had turned brutal and reckless, a woman preacher went to redeem them from jails every week calling them her 99 lost sheep, not one. But Kenyans who lived far from Mount Kenya and even those who lived near always knew that the country would never be the same again since the evolution of this militia. No matter what happened to change things, this would be an unforgettable chapter in the country's history. Police who served the State, not those who were in the force for other reasons, had their enemy clearly identified.

Song of the night

People wondered silently and spoke in whispers about what would happen in the event that this group was truly strong and able to take power.

In one well attended Parliamentary session, the Minister for Security was yelling, "I tell you, you are playing with fire! I tell you, you do not know what you are talking about! I tell you, you do not know where this country is! I tell you....." He went on as the Members of Parliament slept. He looked angry and frustrated.

The fear with which police treated suspected followers of the mili-gang was enough to tell you that the State was threatened.

Disappearance of Kenyans, like that of the snowcap increased by day. Young men suspected of being members of the mili-gangs vanished. Rika's face was inscrutable when she thought of it. Kenya had begun a chapter of its own *desaparecidos*.

When Rika recalled the dance of the two snakes, she focused less on two bling bling wearing men now and more on bloodshed in the country. These issues were enough to cost one all sleep. There is nobody

The priest's prayers were not answered. Scholars in their cool ways said the authorities needed to acknowledge the mili-gangs and stop living in denial. Some felt much compassion on some of these young men who had turned brutal and reckless, a woman preacher went to redeem them from jails every week calling them her 99 lost sheep, not one. But Kenyans who lived far from Mount Kenya and even those who lived near always knew that the country would never be the same again since the evolution of this militia. No matter what happened to change things, this would be an unforgettable chapter in the country's history. Police who served the State, not those who were in the force for other reasons, had their enemy clearly identified.

Song of the night

People wondered silently and spoke in whispers about what would happen in the event that this group was truly strong and able to take power.

In one well attended Parliamentary session, the Minister for Security was yelling, "I tell you, you are playing with fire! I tell you, you do not know what you are talking about! I tell you, you do not know where this country is! I tell you....." He went on as the Members of Parliament slept. He looked angry and frustrated.

The fear with which police treated suspected followers of the mili-gang was enough to tell you that the State was threatened.

Disappearance of Kenyans, like that of the snowcap increased by day. Young men suspected of being members of the mili-gangs vanished. Rika's face was inscrutable when she thought of it. Kenya had begun a chapter of its own *desaparecidos*.

When Rika recalled the dance of the two snakes, she focused less on two bling bling wearing men now and more on bloodshed in the country. These issues were enough to cost one all sleep. There is nobody

whose first name or surname is government. It was like watching a patch of greater darkness within darkness in the night. In the dark, if you see something moving, you see darkness move and fear increases. Watching a moving animal in the dark of the night or in a bad dream is very fearful. In seconds, the beast can change dramatically from an ogre to a tree and vanish like a hare. It looks like a crocodile sometimes, a hyena, a vulture, a hungry lion, an enraged buffalo herd, an angry elephant, a charging rhino, but it is none of these. Animals are much kinder than many governments.

Like in the case of the hotels, Rika had her litany here. She started to say it. Hyenas did not eat the remains of J.M.Kariuki whose mutilated body was found on Ngong Hills only as mutilated by humans. Animals had not eaten the corpse of a young photo journalist whose remains were partly burnt but still found in the Maasai Mara National Game reserve some years back. Vultures did not gather in Koru to eat Robert Ouko's body. Alexander Kipsang Muge was not killed by a lion.

Rika had shared her thoughts with Rei and now, unknown to the two, their minds settled on the same main concerns. A recent execution of two young people one evening in Nairobi reminded many of the swift cold bullet that slid into the chest of Tom Mboya as he walked out of a pharmacy on a Saturday afternoon. It was done only how men do these things. Fast and smart.

Rika looked through the window of her flat. That evening, lightning parted the dark skies and struck the long black coats that filled the city. The rain failed. That evening, at the statue of the naked boy outside the Law Courts, and around the pond, the words wrote themselves. It was a proverb written in many languages. If you wanted to read them all, you had to wait for day to break. That night, the proverb read that wrongs made upon earth, are paid on earth. *Wathi urihagirwo thi.*

It was a long evening, the night came. The evening rush hour to the night of exile had begun. Nobody is safe when donkeys bleed. The night is endless, became the new phrase of introducing every

conversation. The longest night of exile is death. Young men and women broke down. Politicians did not hear the noise. Mothers and fathers broke down. Politicians did not hear their cry. Something in society broke down and fell with a very loud bang. The police eyes did not turn. Those who heard this big sound went deaf. Others did not even hear it.

Tears continued rolling down many cheeks. Power is made of steel. It has no heart. It has no mercy. It has no intestines. It has no tears. It can swallow graves. The tears that rolled down cheeks were friends and families of the dead. An aged woman in Holo, Kisumu rural wept every day, the pain reached Banana Hill in Kiambu. Some dared speak out and march in their long cloaks of pain. But they knew who speaks for the dead must be ready to wear the dress of death.

The black coats hid peoples faces. Fear set in deeply. Those who spoke up for human rights were rubbished. Activists were arrested repeatedly for saying that people are innocent until proven guilty. It was painful to have life taken on suspicion. One lawyer helped young men arrested on suspicion of belonging to gangs. They had bangi or khat planted on them. The lawyer stood alone. After sometime, he began to get big business contracts. He was embarrassed that his high ranking clients should see him representing the riff raff of society. He never again represented bare back castrated young men who had suffered in police custody.

Moving

Rei thought hard. The car moved faster and his clothes blew with the wind in the open window.

“Don’t you think the gang that demands money is different from the gang that demands freedom?”

conversation. The longest night of exile is death. Young men and women broke down. Politicians did not hear the noise. Mothers and fathers broke down. Politicians did not hear their cry. Something in society broke down and fell with a very loud bang. The police eyes did not turn. Those who heard this big sound went deaf. Others did not even hear it.

Tears continued rolling down many cheeks. Power is made of steel. It has no heart. It has no mercy. It has no intestines. It has no tears. It can swallow graves. The tears that rolled down cheeks were friends and families of the dead. An aged woman in Holo, Kisumu rural wept every day, the pain reached Banana Hill in Kiambu. Some dared speak out and march in their long cloaks of pain. But they knew who speaks for the dead must be ready to wear the dress of death.

The black coats hid peoples faces. Fear set in deeply. Those who spoke up for human rights were rubbished. Activists were arrested repeatedly for saying that people are innocent until proven guilty. It was painful to have life taken on suspicion. One lawyer helped young men arrested on suspicion of belonging to gangs. They had bangi or khat planted on them. The lawyer stood alone. After sometime, he began to get big business contracts. He was embarrassed that his high ranking clients should see him representing the riff raff of society. He never again represented bare back castrated young men who had suffered in police custody.

Moving

Rei thought hard. The car moved faster and his clothes blew with the wind in the open window.

“Don’t you think the gang that demands money is different from the gang that demands freedom?”

"I can't answer that. One day we had the same debate in our parking lot. Kama was fast to answer that they were the same because even governments took money to give security, medicine and roads to the people; and keeps freedom in pieces in cupboards. He said these gangs were thieves and that night he slept in the mortuary. He was buried last week. Please stop talking to me about these things now!"

"Yes I will. But come on! I am leaving Kenya. I cannot betray you. Do you not see then that some of the mili-gang are supported by powerful people in government?"

"Yes, the government is not a thing whose face we see clearly."

"Does government support some politicians so that they keep winning elections?"

"Yes. Just the like the gangs!"

"Oh!"

"Oh, yes. Ask even the most innocent person in the land about these gangs. Where they thrive, no one enters the doors of Parliament without their support!"

"The gangs know they have taken the politicians and with that, they also have taken the country." Said Fundi. Fear grew upon such grounds.

Fundi went on. "They say they looked for money everywhere. They would even expect a fee from anyone burying their dead in the rural areas and that if the fee was not received, they would find a way of disturbing those who did not give it. Perhaps they would come for it by taking all the money raised by friends and workmates for an event or for a student in college, or worst of all, opening up graves in the night!"

The car had stopped and on the closed window on Fundi's side brown shaking teeth danced in an open mouth. The face pressed on the window and cupped in his hands seemed to regret having a nose for it seemed to prevent him from coming in through the glass. Fundi smiled seeing the face of his friend with the shaking brown teeth there. He had noticed him as the car passed and had come running to see his dear

friend who left sometime back for the city. He greeted Fundi happily.

Rei went silent realizing they could no longer talk about the gang. He smiled piously. They drove on.

Rei was soaked in the contradictions that sometimes steamed up like mirages on his mind. He was keen to absorb everything. He felt as if he was filling in a jigsaw puzzle. They said the money-hungry part of the gang parted ways with the ones who said they were traditional and whom it was said prayed facing Mount Kenya. Who was to tell who was who in the gang? Some of the members allowed for crime. Others did not. Confusion again. Maybe it was better to forget it all. All the members had their own rituals. What did it matter if they prayed facing Mount Kenya or facing Mount \$\$\$\$?

Maybe the members of the original group sold their ideology in exchange for plenty. They had tried a return to innocence in a hard world. They had tried to return to the simple faith that existed before mainstream religion invaded Afrika. At the time they tried this, part of the police population in the force begun to say and to display their rebirth in Christ Jesus even on TV. They were vehemently fundamentalist born again Christians.

Police in Kenya lived in hard conditions. The reforms they were usually promised always kept the lower ranks in want. They had their own song of sorrows. There was no doubt that there were a number of serious teachings that most people found hard to practice in Christian religions. Alternatives would be welcome by many police who needed to wash away their guilt of shooting many dead. Human beings consciously and unconsciously struggle to belong to the side ticked correct by all and Kenyan police were no exception. Those who joined sects or gangs were affirming that they were operating from a new level of consciousness shunning passivity a trait that Kenyans had taken for many years. Yet all who studied the gang finally confessed bewilderment. Many wished them away but the gang stayed put, defying government authorities and scaring the minister of security every single minute. He

lived like a man herding big dangerous birds that could peck him to death. The gang remained still.

The SabaDefence Force insisted that it only wanted change. Was the country dealing with a monster that outgrew the minds and hands of politicians who initially encouraged its formation? The gang widened its taxation laws threatening those who refused to comply with harm or even death. Money for running your transport van; money for renting a house, money for shifting from one area to another; money for water, money for doing business in this and that zone, money for electricity and money for everything; money for breathing. The gang could take your life any time! Fear suited both the rational and the irrational side of the gang. It shook status quo. Rei was shaken from his reverie of thoughts by a loud female and at the same time deep male voice. It was dry and raspy.

Alleluia

“Praise God!” Joyful Jayne greeted Rev Rei as she bowed down almost to the ground. “Praise God!” She repeated. For her, everyone in long robes was a man of God.

“Amen,” Fundi answered loudly as Rei mumbled something.

“Oh Jeeesus! The wheels of this car may you bless and may you be its driver ever in all its life on earth! Yes, we thank you for having brought our visitors right to the door, Ebenezer, may your name be held holy, Ooooh Fatherrrr!” She went on in pure ecstasy. “Ohhh!! Faaaatherr...before I can shake their hands, cleanse me Oh! Lord, and clean me after I touch them too, for I am a weak and humble servant. This is a *msungu* who serves you, O Lord, I am not worthy; and you know God from where you have brought him and where you are taking him, Amen. We beg peace. We ask all this in His Mighty Name! Amen, Amen, Amen!” went Joyful Jayne. She then broke into a hymn. “Joyful, joyful. Joyful.. I your servant Joyful Jayne...” She trailed along.

lived like a man herding big dangerous birds that could peck him to death. The gang remained still.

The SabaDefence Force insisted that it only wanted change. Was the country dealing with a monster that outgrew the minds and hands of politicians who initially encouraged its formation? The gang widened its taxation laws threatening those who refused to comply with harm or even death. Money for running your transport van; money for renting a house, money for shifting from one area to another; money for water, money for doing business in this and that zone, money for electricity and money for everything; money for breathing. The gang could take your life any time! Fear suited both the rational and the irrational side of the gang. It shook status quo. Rei was shaken from his reverie of thoughts by a loud female and at the same time deep male voice. It was dry and raspy.

Alleluia

“Praise God!” Joyful Jayne greeted Rev Rei as she bowed down almost to the ground. “Praise God!” She repeated. For her, everyone in long robes was a man of God.

“Amen,” Fundi answered loudly as Rei mumbled something.

“Oh Jeeesus! The wheels of this car may you bless and may you be its driver ever in all its life on earth! Yes, we thank you for having brought our visitors right to the door, Ebenezer, may your name be held holy, Ooooh Fatherrrr!” She went on in pure ecstasy. “Ohhh!! Faaaatherr...before I can shake their hands, cleanse me Oh! Lord, and clean me after I touch them too, for I am a weak and humble servant. This is a *msungu* who serves you, O Lord, I am not worthy; and you know God from where you have brought him and where you are taking him, Amen. We beg peace. We ask all this in His Mighty Name! Amen, Amen, Amen!” went Joyful Jayne. She then broke into a hymn. “Joyful, joyful. Joyful.. I your servant Joyful Jayne...” She trailed along.

This little drama took place in Joyful Jayne's little neat little garden surrounded by bourgainvillea bushes. Rei had no words. He had not seen this in Nairobi. He managed it well, but he looked like a scared priest.

Promptly, they were in the house and all were seated to eat the lunch time meal at 2.30. Joyful Jayne led more prayers to bless the food and Rei was happy not to be asked to say the blessing. He had not said grace before meals for over twenty years of his life!"

Fundi's sister Joyful Jayne was very happy to have visitors from a far country as people would say. They spoke and ate fast. But her son was critical of how she behaved before a *jungu*!

"Stay for the night, you people! You can stay in the tent apart! We know many have entertained angels without knowing!" Joyful Jayne said.

Hepa, Fundi's nephew walked in during this conversation.

"Ho! we have a visitor from far, Uncle Fuun?"

"Yes! please meet Ali, Rei," Said Fundi.

"Ari, he is called Alirirree?" piped in Joyful Jayne.

Rei was keenly looking at Hepa's special hairdo. It was a rough mat of unbraided long hair. The two shook hands. Hepa drained a glass of water down, tilting it till the last drop fell in his mouth as his hair swam around his face.

"I like your hair," Rei said.

"Thanks." Hepa answered dryly but a little amused because his mother used to rave and rant about his bad hairstyle.

"We are just about to leave for Nairobi," Said Fundi.

"Stay a little longer," urged Hepa.

"Do you have some work to do here in the village?" Rei asked Hepa.

"No. I help feed the goats and chicken and then I go and sit with my friends and we talk for almost the whole day as we watch cars coming and going to Nairobi."

“You speak good English. You have been to college. Do you get bored?”

“Not any more, I used to when I just left school. Then I hoped I would not be here after University but here I am! This is my life!”

“Do you and your friends have plans on how to get jobs?”

“No, but we make money in our own ways.”

“Would you like a job in Nairobi like Uncle Fundi?”

“Yes, but one that brings in more money than Uncle can get daily and it does not exist! I made 2, 500 job applications on posts advertised by NGOs and Government in the daily papers, but none of them even invited me for an interview!”

“What kind of job then, would you take in Nairobi if those did not work?”

“I don’t know but many of my friends are barbers during the day and do other things to earn money at night. Our girlfriends go to Nairobi either because they get married there or because they work at night. My sister went there some months ago. She has not been heard of since. She is quiet. We hope she is still alive. But this, they say, this happens until a girl or new wife is stable and then, they send some money home and finally they come back looking like white people! Or brown like you! Some of them after sometime, are taken to the villages in a coffin. My cousin who was given a ride by Uncle Fundi’s friend has never been heard of since! It is now one year.”

“Too many things you say Hepa my son, which do not praise Jesus! Keep quiet now!”

Hepa frowned at Joyful Jayne, his mother and looked at her long and straight in the eye without a word.

“Stay for the night Fundi, “ Joyful Jayne said. “We have enough room for you.”

“No, our visitor leaves the country tomorrow at midnight and in the morning he wants to be in Nairobi,” Fundi answered fast.

“But still. You can be in town by 8am.”

“No,” Rei objected, explaining that his friend in Nairobi, would worry about him. He said he had not informed her he was coming to ‘Mooranga’, as he pronounced it.

Fundi knew that this offer was always made to visitors up country even when the family had no bed and they knew fully well that it could not work. It was a sign of generosity. In Afrika, people always tried to hide the road of return for visitors and when they could not, they always took them down the road they had to take even when they knew they would not get lost. They knew that lonely journeys are not the best for humans. The offer was always real.

And on the last day

When Rika called Rei in the night, he did not tell her where he had been. She assumed he was resting and writing. He did not tell her he was going to downtown Nairobi and then Mathare on the next day. He advised Rika to rest. He said he would call her at about 7 in the evening. She assumed he needed time to buy gifts, pack and relax. The days had gone so fast.

Early Friday morning found Rei walking fast. He had no idea how the city roads interconnected beyond Tom Mboya Street. He put himself in the hands of Fundi who had kept him safe the previous day. Barely five minutes away from Kimathi Street, they hopped into a place called Exhibition Y. A huge bounty of wares and lively music hit them immediately. There is a flood of the latest attractions: shiny mobile phones, little mirrors, caps, bracelets, rings, key holders, chains, scarves, all kinds of things and trinkets cover the ground floor. All of them shine like gold in the sun and Rei noticed no Afrikan wares, leather and cloth in sight. *Bling- blings* filled the wall spaces.

There was shiny clothing and more and more imitation jewelry. There were pots and pans and everything one could think of. There

“No,” Rei objected, explaining that his friend in Nairobi, would worry about him. He said he had not informed her he was coming to ‘Mooranga’, as he pronounced it.

Fundi knew that this offer was always made to visitors up country even when the family had no bed and they knew fully well that it could not work. It was a sign of generosity. In Afrika, people always tried to hide the road of return for visitors and when they could not, they always took them down the road they had to take even when they knew they would not get lost. They knew that lonely journeys are not the best for humans. The offer was always real.

And on the last day

When Rika called Rei in the night, he did not tell her where he had been. She assumed he was resting and writing. He did not tell her he was going to downtown Nairobi and then Mathare on the next day. He advised Rika to rest. He said he would call her at about 7 in the evening. She assumed he needed time to buy gifts, pack and relax. The days had gone so fast.

Early Friday morning found Rei walking fast. He had no idea how the city roads interconnected beyond Tom Mboya Street. He put himself in the hands of Fundi who had kept him safe the previous day. Barely five minutes away from Kimathi Street, they hopped into a place called Exhibition Y. A huge bounty of wares and lively music hit them immediately. There is a flood of the latest attractions: shiny mobile phones, little mirrors, caps, bracelets, rings, key holders, chains, scarves, all kinds of things and trinkets cover the ground floor. All of them shine like gold in the sun and Rei noticed no Afrikan wares, leather and cloth in sight. *Bling- blings* filled the wall spaces.

There was shiny clothing and more and more imitation jewelry. There were pots and pans and everything one could think of. There

were no such things as clay pots here. Rei could even see a hammer and nails from where he stood. From pink hair ribbons to shiny pins, everything could be found in Exhibition Y as were all sorts of people. There was food, porridge and some strange looking soft drinks. Some of the drinks were packed in shiny red and gold sachets.

All these goods there were not different from the wares that hawkers hang out in the open air alley stalls. It is only that they were under one roof, a kind of supermarket. Some of the goods were, at a glance, slightly sophisticated electronics. Fundi whispered to Rei that much more business went on undercover. Who knew what you hid in the seams of your clothes? Who would know how you arrange money in your underwear?

“Few buyers go beyond the stalls on the ground floors of any of these Exhibition shops even when they have a second floor. And that is where tough business goes on!” Fundi said.

Rei was keen to open his eyes to things Nairobians who park and enter offices to work for the day are ignorant of. As soon as they started going up the steps, their bodies were conscious that a few eyes escorted them to the top. Fundi always knew that the back part of the neck, the nape sensed stares. He did not ask Rei if it was the same for him. He assumed it was.

“This is a club. Most of the people who venture upstairs are approved customers,” Fundi said proudly. At the first stop, the stall reminds Rei of a village kiosk in its cheap wood design, but he recalls they are in a concrete walled building in the Central Business District still. He is happy with a soda worth twenty shillings, the same one he bought at seventy shillings at The Gama and almost twice that at the Park. As he sips his cold drink, he notices four men seated drinking from something he cannot see. It looked as if they were squeezing a liquid out of their fingers but in time, he sees little sachets squeezed between their rough and shaking palms. He asks how much they are worth and learns something he thinks is funny.

“They are not called packets,” Says Fundi.

“But they are!”

“No, he says laughing, you ask for packets of alcohol and the seller does not even look at you, you ask for ‘condoms’ and you get them with a look of compassion!”

“But you must be joking! I thought that in this land the word ‘condom’ was anathema, I thought, it was not pronounced!

“Not here! Not in Nairobi. Laugh if you like but even in the rural areas, these are called kodomu! They say the prevent the drinkers from getting the HIV and pregnancy of the head.”

“I see. The city has its ways over cultures everywhere!”

“Yes. And the rural areas too, but people remain *haipocritical* about change! His pronunciation of hypocritical hit Rei’s ears. All this time, apart from a few constructions like ‘You are Arab man,’ Fundi had not used big words and had spoken plainly and simply.

“Yes, hypocritical and you are right! No matter where in the world!”

“The condoms only cost ten shillings!” Adds Fundi.

The men fumbled with the sachets as if they were touching something warm on a chilly evening, stroking something precious. They fondled them like a beggar holding a coin found on the road after begging all day. Like a small bank note, found on a path by a manual worker when the boss has refused to pay. They always stuck some of these sachets in the inner pockets of their coats, joking that they were now bulletproof. One man’s timbre got higher by the seconds. It then became sloppy as if it could not support more weight.

“I wirrlllooo wiroooo walko.. woko if you show me the roadi.ii”. he mumbled.

The others sounded more jovial every moment.

It was not yet 9:45 in the morning. Fundi warned Rei that by 10am, these men would be dancing with women and falling all over the place in apparent joy. They would be jumping and kicking and

after sometime, they would be slumped in a corner unable to move lying and sweating like heap of slugs exposed in the sun.

Rei looks over the counter and sees that a pair of scissors goes snip, snip, endlessly cutting the tips of the empty little plastic pockets to release the liquid. There was nothing sluggish about that. The hand of another man quickly picked the little papers from the ground and put them in a large and greasy sack. But the sack had more than paper inside one could tell from looking at the protrusions on the side. The policeman around does not want to see that this man is a supplier of contraband. This man is just pretending to clean up the area. Watching him Later Rei learns that all the papers he picks are used for making steam, a sniffing glue and drink that few knew what it was made of, but which all street children stuck to their noses daily.

On the counter, Rei stared at a green flask that stood there. He knew for sure it was not full of simple tea. In fact, it had a steam that flew out fast once open. This steam seemed to make everyone happy including the cops who visited routinely.

The dexterity of the hand that cuts the sachets fascinates him. It never went limp from cutting long ones, square ones filled with drinks made in Kenya. Was that another sign of Kenya's tenacity he wondered. More drinkers came and they got more and more lively until one by one, their speech began to slur and they tried to force large and empty smiles. Two of them started knocking their heads on the wall and grabbing each other. Together, they stared at a sachet endlessly and had a silent conversation for quite some time. They had signed a silent pact to support one another, he thought.

Occasionally, the drunkards dragged themselves into the lodging rooms just round the corner. They came out hauling their pants up with their flies open. It was as if their trousers were too heavy for them.

Next stops

Some young men drink happily in the next place they stop at. The vendor is a young woman in trousers and she comes out from behind the counter to sit on the little bench near the door. Her brown checked trousers tell of a tough life. It is not until Fundi looks again and again that he recognizes the lower part of Hepa's cousin's face. Here is Rose. She had grown long hair and permed it. A wedge of it fell in front of her eyes and down the left of her face. It was hard even for people who knew her before to recognize her. Her face was well powdered. Fundi and she communicated without words. Fundi said that he would soon be back to see her on his own. She on the other hand went on to make him feel that Rei should stay longer and buy something, or ask for a service. Fundi brushed her off. How, her angry face asked in silence, how could Fundi be so stupid as to allow all the goodies to return to the west? Did he not remember a proverb that talked about goodies finding a woman working in the farm. But there were new proverbs covering the walls.

A little display board complete with decorations in writing hits Rei's eyes. He is taken with the translations. These are short and to the point. 'Waacha wivu', (Shun jealousy!) Hakuna chozi hata bila mchuzi! (No tear even if there is no soup), 'Hatucheki na watu' (We don't laugh with people!), 'Wee Kamu!' (You come!), 'Uko fresh lakini?' (Are you OK?).

All these were written by hand. Around them some drawings and pictures were pasted. They hang there in a photos that attracted all eyes. Rei's were glued on the board. He remembered the messages at The Stanley. He knew he was far from the Africa of men and women jumping high above the ground in wonderful dances, he knew their dance had been stolen. Every high place has a corresponding valley. Every happy culture its converse side. *Hakuna matata* meant something different here. Everyone here tried to show that they had more than

just a body, they moved all the time. No one ate here. Everyone drank. People sweated and drunk vapor and turned into spirits. Their religions and bodies became one; they spoke all tongues and did not know tribe.

They crossed the road and went into Green Café where Fundi was meeting a friend who wanted his key. It was the key of his shop and while in Mombasa he had left it in town with Fundi for a month. They had agreed to meet the night before. He was surprised to find that the atmosphere inside Green Café was almost a night-time one, this early in the morning. There were men holding skimpily dressed girls who looked like dolls on their laps. Here is where Afrikan men and some toughened Caucasians were baby sitting young girls. Here too, one very rarely heard about tribe. There was an unspoken understanding of basic human needs.

Anyone's first thought would be; with Aids infection on the rise, how does this continue? The skinny ebony skin girl X who sits there is dressed in deep red and a sea blue jean jacket. She is a self made blonde from the hair to the stockings. The contrast of her blonde wig and face shocks. But as for her, shocks are not part of her vocabulary. She is reveling in sitting on a man's lap and showing him off as if to say, 'if you thought he is someone's husband, look at me as I turn him into a toy!'

She is so tiny that her legs in sweet little front strapped black and red shoes are hanging in the air as she sinks deeper into the man's groin. Fundi is quiet. He and Rei have their eyes so wide open that they can feel air touching their eyeballs. The bus to Mathare is no longer on their minds. For a while they are in another world.

In front of them, two girls have a mission. They must break Rei's indifference to them. They bump into him and pull his hand He frees himself and looks right ahead of him smiling. Later Fundi told him that he was the marked new species in their kingdom! He told him had he not been with him, they would have tried much harder to get him to talk with them. If he resisted all their desperate appeals, they would have called him names to see him get angry with them just to get him emotionally involved. They were queens and masters of their game.

The owner of the place kept safely behind a grille near his counter and his money safe.

Fundi and Rei go to Frustra pub round the corner. It is the one that turns into a vibrant church in the mornings and at lunch hour. Three young men beckon Rei. One is lame and the other has a glazed look in his eyes. It is as if his eyeballs have been sprayed with a coat of shining stuff. The third begins his pleas from as far as Joyful Jayne begun her prayer in Murang'a. They are all looking at the sober one out of the three. They say they know him. There was a time he was as dirty as they are now, unkempt and drunk. They are now saying to Rei and Fundi they want to be like their clean colleague. Rehabilitated. They are asking Rei to help them with sponsorship. They say it is expensive and difficult to be accepted in a rehab. They ask the sober one to tell Rei to remember that just the other day, he was like them until a priest who looked just like Rei, helped him. Sponsor, sponsor! sponsor! sponsor! they all cry.

Inside Frustra, older women have taken charge. Once Rei and Fundi enter in, it is obvious that those under age girls are on offer. The language of the senior matrons is coded; like the language of all gangs. The girls get a soda after every man takes a look at them. They are managing them, Fundi explains in the same way as other women manage the sales of an illegal drink called chang'aa, which is normally sold by women both in the villages and in the city.

Rei thinks of the women who hold the girls down at circumcision in the rural areas always happy about their little girls getting married to older men; even laughing at the little girls who felt walled in by centuries of tradition and wanted to rebel. Rei had read that they laughed at the little girls. Taunted them, these older women did, telling them it was impossible to break away.

A stinging heaviness began to fill Rei's mind. His head ached badly. He felt for his pills in his pocket. It is his last day in Nairobi. He only has a few hours. He did not feel out of place. Once on the plane, he

knew he would be safe. He was not concerned about who saw him downtown. He knew he had a cassock in Fundi's bag to fall back on when things got bad. He wore a two inch black iron bare cross conspicuously on the right side of his chest, like a good reverend father.

Rei was deeply surprised by this Nairobi. He thought he knew Nairobi. Neither he nor Fundi noticed that the cop who was aligned to the mili-gang was hovering around in ordinary clothes. He was the cop Wairi feared most on the street. She kept feeling that he had- after all-linked Rei to her and that he was afraid that Rei knew him, and probably knew too much about the gang. Who was Rei? this policeman must have wondered. Why did he disguise himself and why was he so close to Wairi? The policeman was sure that no Leader of the gang knew him. Just then Fundi came in and they left. Every step the cop took made him feel that he was on a great mission for the gang tonight. His heart beat with high expectation.

Rei and Fundi met a young man Fundi knew. He was reading from an old Reader's Digest on the street. Rei's eyes fell with surprise on the page. "How to get fame and fortune quickly!" The young man shook Fundi's hand vigorously and then touched his heart with his clenched fist. Many people recognize Fundi's face here, he had wanted to put up a stall at the place he was now pointing out to Rei. Reggae music blared on. "*They won't build no schools anymore, all they will build will be prison, prison!*" The young man joined in the beautiful Dube tune, shouting, "*Am a prisoner!*" His voice merged with the booming music of a *matatu* that almost jumped over the kerb before grabbing its freedom and getting back on the road.

Chang'aa drink dens

High on a bluff in the Grogan Street where posh cars are in repair some mechanics work fast like the steam of Chang'aa. A huge shack, a den,

knew he would be safe. He was not concerned about who saw him downtown. He knew he had a cassock in Fundi's bag to fall back on when things got bad. He wore a two inch black iron bare cross conspicuously on the right side of his chest, like a good reverend father.

Rei was deeply surprised by this Nairobi. He thought he knew Nairobi. Neither he nor Fundi noticed that the cop who was aligned to the mili-gang was hovering around in ordinary clothes. He was the cop Wairi feared most on the street. She kept feeling that he had- after all-linked Rei to her and that he was afraid that Rei knew him, and probably knew too much about the gang. Who was Rei? this policeman must have wondered. Why did he disguise himself and why was he so close to Wairi? The policeman was sure that no Leader of the gang knew him. Just then Fundi came in and they left. Every step the cop took made him feel that he was on a great mission for the gang tonight. His heart beat with high expectation.

Rei and Fundi met a young man Fundi knew. He was reading from an old Reader's Digest on the street. Rei's eyes fell with surprise on the page. "How to get fame and fortune quickly!" The young man shook Fundi's hand vigorously and then touched his heart with his clenched fist. Many people recognize Fundi's face here, he had wanted to put up a stall at the place he was now pointing out to Rei. Reggae music blared on. "*They won't build no schools anymore, all they will build will be prison, prison!*" The young man joined in the beautiful Dube tune, shouting, "*Am a prisoner!*" His voice merged with the booming music of a *matatu* that almost jumped over the kerb before grabbing its freedom and getting back on the road.

Chang'aa drink dens

High on a bluff in the Grogan Street where posh cars are in repair some mechanics work fast like the steam of Chang'aa. A huge shack, a den,

with slabs for chairs and tables is the place these workers go for solace. Under the slabs, Chang'aa quietly boils to the right degree. School boys will pass by and get some on their way home, old men and women too, will do the same. As long as you know where it is sold, you can buy it. You are initiated in the ways of the city.

A young man in the den is giving a lecture about Rome! Looking at Rei who can hardly believe this, he clearly distinguishes the city of Rome from Vatican city, which he explains is another country. He talks like one who had been there for a long time.

He talks with ease about President Silvio Berlusconi and even quotes him. He keeps on referring to him the way Christians say the Bible says, He does not invite anyone to discuss his quotes. Silvio says: "Italy will always be grateful to the United States for what this country has been doing to free us from totalitarianism in the past century." Silvio says: "I have never before read such rubbish in the newspapers as I did this morning. 'Bush contradicts Berlusconi'. When? How? About what?" "If I, taking care of everyone's interests, also take care of my own, you can't talk about a conflict of interest." Says Silvio.

In the middle of this, the young man tells funny stories seemingly not connected with anything he was talking about before. Now, he is telling of a late Kenyan MP who could eat a whole goat on his own; cracking most of the bones and sucking out all the bone marrow and swallowing it smoothly.

"He just chopped it with his jaw!" The young man explains, going with his own teeth, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop! The MP was a fat and tall man. That was long time ago, before MPs were paid good salaries! Today they aimed at the second highest in the world! Maybe they too wanted to eat many goats in their lifetime. "If he were here today, the young man goes on, he would be eating five goats a day now!" He stopped and laughed nervously, and then went on. "Just, "Chop! Chop! Chop! Chop! Chop! Chop! was his work. Chop! Chop!

Chop! Chop! Chop! Chop! The young man goes again, grinding his teeth and laughing.

In the same shack a sack full of cooked maize and beans still steaming and boiling surprised even Fundi. A Chinese decorated melanin plate is driven many times by a hand into the sack, and each time, it comes out heaped with soft reddish brown beans with some grains of maize in between. Each time the plate comes out, the sack goes down a little. The sack was folded down as people scooped out more hard maize and beans with the red flowery plastic plate made in China. In the end, the sack was empty. Each plate of *murram* cost twenty shillings, a third of a dollar. There was chicken for fifty bob; almost a dollar. Black beans loved for high iron content were here too. A glass of any juice; avocado, mango or mixed fruit went for ten bob. For now, people looked into their pockets and found coins and bought this food and ate it.

In The Grande Corruption Conspiracy Room, elegant glasses went chink! Chink! chink! Click, click! and the government ministers who were there, judiciary, parliament, some civil society persons, some churches and the literati went on toasting and shouting: Cheers! Cheers! Cheers! Cheers! Out of nowhere, a young man rushed in and broke all their glasses. He told them to look for Yaaadi, who knew how to toast traditionally. The security men watched him and let him go. They called him a brother. The two rich men now sitting with other women, fled the city for the night.

Rei knew a day would soon be here when food would be out of reach for the people who were eating in the shack. He had prepared many reports for FAO in the past. Governments were selling large tracts of African land to the East. People in Ethiopia, for instance, would be paid very little to work on such lands and the food produced was going to the global village. It was the same in Kenya and other lands. The world economy was precarious and food was going to get more and

more scarce especially in some parts of the world, as did clean water. Rei's concern was for the coming generations.

A young, handsome and strong street boy watches a cop closely. He endlessly ferries the fruit peels thrown around to the dump to earn five shillings per trip. As he asks for his pay, it is obvious he has also enjoyed his play. Fundi pulls him to himself and feels his stomach and tickles him. He is full. Some adults standing follow the little boy's eyes to the plain clothes cop, but Rei and Fundi still do not have a clue. The local people know the little boy is a spitting image of the cop. But no one talks about that as the boy cuddles his bottle of glue closer to his nose.

Fundi gives Rei his clothes in the little bag and a woman draws a curtain. He enters in, slips on the cassock that Fundi had carried all along in an old red and black plastic bag from Chumi, a local supermarket. Rei was surprised to see how neatly things were kept in her bedroom. He saw, with the light that slanted through a small opening near the window, and in spite of the poor lighting, many pictures of Miriam Makeba, Bob Marley, Mandela, Kimathi. They were pinned all round the walls. It was almost a hall of fame. Even Senator Obama's photo with a bundle on his back, helping his grandmother in Kogelo was there.

It was getting late. Rei and Fundi walked fast to catch a *matatu* to Mathare. The people left behind watched the cop take his porridge slowly. With his dark silver spoon, he first removed a thin layer that had dried on top. He scooped out melting sugar that was showing on the sides and then scrapped off the brown liquid from the edges of the plate, as he ate big spoonfuls. He savoured every morsel and it was clear he could not part with any of the it. This porridge was special. It was made and served by the woman who gave Rei a place to change as she licked her lips after drinking the same gruel. She looked mischievously at Rei as if to ask what he really wanted there.

The little boy looked anxious. He was frustrated. He tugged at his glue bottle as he gazed for long on the face of this woman. It was as if his image wanted to stick on hers but was falling off. He would never guess it was this woman's breast that fed him in his first days of life. All he knew is that from time to time, she seemed to care for him. He wanted so badly to be held close by her for long. He wanted her to squeeze his little cheeks upon her big ones. But she never did that. She kept her distance and was kindly.

But the little boy was lucky; he survived on her odd care and a playful smack on his back. He always felt as if that woman had something she owed him. He did not feel like that about anyone else in the city. Now he had escaped from a children's home with a strong feeling to just come and be near her and see her face. He always found himself gently staring at her, but she would often only call his name and give him work. He knew she only allowed him to be there a while, and then she would chase him out to go to the middle of town with the rest of the 'herd'. She said he belonged there with the rest. "Don't be backward!" She would shout. "Go to the city lights, like all other boys who are like you!" He always wondered what was like him in other boys. He would hang his head to one side and start walking. He would be like a Mwogli in a city pavement jungle. He alone and searched forever for his mother's face with deep yearning. People did not talk too much about mothers who rejected their own children but they were puzzled. They knew what kind of bribe men planted in such women for nine months every new season of the woman's body.

Mathare

Babs knew just as well as Fundi did that people who had never gone beyond Eastleigh were afraid to be in Mathare. Even journalists never let down their guard when visiting. They feared many things. The possibility of sudden violence was always so alive!

But Babs still went. He used to say that we lie to ourselves often. The biggest lie, he would say after asking you to name it and you tried five times and failed, is that we are in control of our lives. Humans live on this sense of false security, Babs said. Rei and Rika were daring, as was Babs. Once you learned to, being in difficult places became necessary.

But today, Rei and Fundi feared unseen eyes watching from behind the shacks nervously. Somehow too, the eyes of the plain clothes cop whom they had not identified remained with them and their bodies felt them. Unseen eyes were indeed looking through the cracks in the shacks. These eyes in their turn feared two strangers walking together. They were a bit relieved when they saw the big cross on the reverend's dress. They immediately knew that his companion was a harmless assistant. Then they calmed down. Messages stopped flying from house to house like locusts flying from tree to tree. They assumed, he was a new or visiting priest going to see a sick member of his own flock.

It was most surprising when a man ran behind the two with a ballpoint- Rei's expensive one- telling them they had lost something and handing it back. This gave them a little more confidence and they relaxed as they walked on. All Rei wanted to see was the area, a few 'houses' and life in the slums, he had said.

He saw, heard, felt and touched a lot. Life in the slums was alive. It seemed to rise and touch all his senses too. He saw many men and women drinking local brew; but in larger glasses than the ones he had seen anywhere in the world. He saw women dash off from little shack kiosks as soon as they saw them coming but learned later that they were running away from the man who was about ten meters behind them. He had no idea why but the women knew without any doubt that the man was a policeman.

Motooooo! Fireee... Uuuuuuuu! Flames burst out of the house on fire and seemed to feed on everything around in minutes. The flames leapt as if they could also burn the air and reach the sky. The plastic papers that were part of the walls burnt down in seconds. Some flew

up burning in the air. Many shelters that converged hugging each other were burning together. Flames grew bigger in between 'walls'. People were trying to rescue those trapped inside. Children were crying. Goats were bleating. Hungry lean dogs scurried. The cop ran to help. He joined women and men who were throwing bucketfuls of water from their large cooking black pans onto the fire. Rei sped on fast towards the fire as Fundi called him back saying that they had to leave. The fire was still spreading in all directions and fast too. It leapt in big tongues and the heat was felt everywhere. Fundi now noticed that the cop had stopped helping to put out the fire and was closely following Rei and him. He looked back again and their eyes met for one uncomfortable second. Fundi was almost paralysed with fear but he knew he had to move on.

Rei and Fundi walked up a hill together and ran down the other side of it. Suddenly, Rei was transfixed in one spot. Here was Wairi in very bloody clothes. She was crying. Her face was badly injured and swollen. She was in great pain. Wairi could hardly see, her eyes were red and sore; swollen to a slight little wedge which looked as if it could close completely. Her eyelids were holding blood back from flowing out of her head. Through that small slit between her cheeks and forehead, she saw a priest, not Rei.

"Father!", she cried. "Father, please help me! Help me! Help me please, I am dying!" she cried. Fundi had no idea that Rei recognized Wairi.

"What does this crazy woman think?" Fundi said, brushing her off fast..

"No. Quick! Take her! Take her bundles too! No, actually throw them away, take her!" He heard Rei say with a hushed but sharp voice. But Wairi clutched on to her little bag.

"Let's get out of here!" whispered Rei hissing with energy on every word.

Fundi tried to show reluctance but his boss's facial command was final.

This was no time for questions. Fundi held Wairi by the hand and then put his arms around her waist and moved up the hill through a lot of trash and muck including fresh mounds of shit.

Fundi was sweating as Rei whispered to him.

"Look, I cannot help you to carry her. If I do, people will be suspicious. Take a bus at the stop where we alighted. I can see it from here." Rei said to a bent Fundi. Rei could feel he was being watched very closely. He was right.

"Okeiii!"

"I will walk slowly to the stop after this, over there..." Rei mumbled. He knew Fundi could not speak with Wairi on his shoulders.

"When you get to town wait for me at the stop opposite The University of Nairobi. There is a clinic there."

"Eeh, Okeiii...Sssawa!" Fundi just managed to hiss out.

As Rei walked to the next spot, no bus had come yet but now Fundi had ready answers for anyone who might bother coming up with questions. He was helping a sick woman to get to a hospital. Two young men offered to help him simultaneously offering their '*pole, bwana!*,' "Sorry sir," as they moved along.

They had not seen her face and they asked if she had labor pains and if they should call a woman. They thought Fundi was her husband.

Rei walked on. Fundi decided to take a *matatu* as many had sped by and they were easier to board with a sick person. One stopped. The music blared inside. Fundi thought, *Matatus* were always in the same mood. Music and speed. But they saved many lives too. He remembered the day passengers were thrown out of one quickly and it was converted into a maternity ward for a woman to be delivered of her baby. It then became an ambulance and rushed her to hospital at no charge. The driver was its owner. They said he cried on the way and kept saying, 'Mani, sometimes one has to hail, to revere all women!'

Rei went to the next bus stop and waited for bus No. 6. He was soon on the other side of Nairobi and here he thought he could wait, for the two without fear. Their *Matatu* had not stopped so often picking and dropping passengers but in trying to use shortcuts it had been stuck for a while. He had got back to the city before them. They did not see the cop again.

Rei and Fundi took Wairi to the clinic. She was treated for half an hour. It turned out she was not as bad as she looked. Her pain subsided with painkillers.

She got several injections too. The doctor was optimistic about her deep cuts but she had to keep very clean. They said they feared deep trauma most. She consented to all tests requested on a big form. All of them, including HIV/Aids were negative.

Rei changed, took off his cassock to the surprise of the nurse in the clinic. The nurses said Wairi would recover with rest and medication and she was not in serious danger. He was very pleased with their quick work. He went into two shops opposite the 24 hour service supermarket near the City Market and bought soft shoes made of cloth and some clothes for Wairi. When he came back, the assistant nurse sponged her again, and changed her clothes. She was bandaged and soothed with creams. The last injections had already been given to her. Rei paid.

Fundi ran to his cab and drove it up. Leaving her resting in Rei's room, Fundi could not wait to tell his wife all this. The next morning, he told it to his friends with a quick pace. It was as if a dam was breaking. He went into every detail painting every scene with sounds and words. They listened standing around their taxis and keeping an eye open for possible clients.

"You never know with some Jungus, they are strange. Some pay us badly, call us names, kill our women and some are wonderful. It is like that with people everywhere. I would never have touched that woman or done what he did," Fundi said.

“You mean, he was not looking for her...” Kama, asked.

“We say our women give us their “things” and offer them to the Jungu too, often and we get disease. But we are the ones who pay them for it. Remember how Wai used to use all his money in the evenings on the girls in his taxi till he got Aids?” There is something wrong with all of us. He looked to the left and spat heavily on the ground.

The drivers did not drive their taxis home but parked them safely in the city. They said no one takes their offices home and many of them had only hired these vehicles. They took *matatus* to work, buses were more expensive. They eagerly gathered every morning to chat as they waited for clients.

It was a pity Rei did not get to hear them chatting and telling one another their stories which were almost movie like. Some of them were about police shooting a car until it became an open shell, others were about young couples in town and many were about politics and religion.

They played their music softly and always referred to local songs such as ‘Msichana wa Kangemi’ and Owiyo’s *Kisumu Ber* (Beautiful Kisumu), as regularly as traditional people used proverbs.

Rei knew like many travelling writers and journalists do, that in most countries, there was nothing that could beat the stories of taxi drivers when told in a good mood. For him, they were a special mirror of life.

Rika knew of the elderly unforgettable taxi drivers. Every time she was a passenger, they told her how they had so often driven a quiet politician from independence times. They said that now he never remembered them but only called press conferences to give long explanations about his family. They wondered why he never thought of calling all taxi drivers to a meeting.

“True,” Omucha wa Taxi would say,” this old car of mine has carried powerful people from right outside our bay outside Barclays Bank on Loita Street to State House, Parliament Buildings and to their homes and even to pubs to drink. He was again talking about the legendary

man whom all taxi drivers talked about whenever they could. “I have seen their night lives.... But they never look back at the stones they stepped on to get where they are! “Who can lead alone?” He expected no answer. He said he was shocked at the two men who were doing shining business with the shining class and families of the rich, here in Kenya, as so many starved to death in the North. He said this was a bad omen. Rika saw the dance of the snakes going on again in her mind.

Country crowned with thorns

Back in Rei's room, hidden between clean sheets, Wairi wept. It was as if she could have cried out her soul. When she said she wanted to leave her country, she did not mean she was ready for such deep humiliation. She did not see the soft cream sheets that surrounded her or feel the comfort of her room. Her soul was in deep pain. She wept as if to scour clean her spirit. After sometime, her eyelashes softened and wet now stood clearly on her eyelids. The swellings had gone down fast with the medicine but her eyes were still scarlet red swallowing the black bead in her eye almost completely.

When she finally uncovered her face, she kept

on talking, telling her own story herself first and then to Rei. She regretted that she had not dared to run away from Yaadi earlier. She thought she should have hidden in a lorry one day or sat beside a driver in long distance trailer and refused to leave risking police checks in the night. Maybe she could have disguised herself as a man. She regretted not having gone anywhere else on earth than stayed, but she was leading her night in the way she thought best. She told her story over and over again. Yaadi beat and threw her out of his shack. He had hit her many times on her head with a cooking stick. He had boxed her soft cheeks because he found some lipstick she had forgotten to take out of her little handbag in which he also found five dollars.

man whom all taxi drivers talked about whenever they could. “I have seen their night lives.... But they never look back at the stones they stepped on to get where they are! “Who can lead alone?” He expected no answer. He said he was shocked at the two men who were doing shining business with the shining class and families of the rich, here in Kenya, as so many starved to death in the North. He said this was a bad omen. Rika saw the dance of the snakes going on again in her mind.

Country crowned with thorns

Back in Rei's room, hidden between clean sheets, Wairi wept. It was as if she could have cried out her soul. When she said she wanted to leave her country, she did not mean she was ready for such deep humiliation. She did not see the soft cream sheets that surrounded her or feel the comfort of her room. Her soul was in deep pain. She wept as if to scour clean her spirit. After sometime, her eyelashes softened and wet now stood clearly on her eyelids. The swellings had gone down fast with the medicine but her eyes were still scarlet red swallowing the black bead in her eye almost completely.

When she finally uncovered her face, she kept

on talking, telling her own story herself first and then to Rei. She regretted that she had not dared to run away from Yaadi earlier. She thought she should have hidden in a lorry one day or sat beside a driver in long distance trailer and refused to leave risking police checks in the night. Maybe she could have disguised herself as a man. She regretted not having gone anywhere else on earth than stayed, but she was leading her night in the way she thought best. She told her story over and over again. Yaadi beat and threw her out of his shack. He had hit her many times on her head with a cooking stick. He had boxed her soft cheeks because he found some lipstick she had forgotten to take out of her little handbag in which he also found five dollars.

Yaadi had become a beast. Even his donkey used to look at him long and without blinking whenever she could. He screeched he would kill Wairi and cut off her head with an axe. When the house was engulfed in smoke, she was rolling on the ground with pain because he had just cut her upper arms with a machete. He told her she had graduated from razor cuts to this. She choked in there and her eyes stung deeply. Yaadi boxed her hard in the eyes and disappeared leaving her for dead.. This fire was sure going to burn all the houses and her, he thought. He only ran to save his ritual regalia. He had to hide some of his private 'goods' fast for he believed that a man who was going to die soon always allowed his precious things to get lost. He knew that police almost always appeared in Mathare in plain clothes before a fire happened; and he did not want to risk. He was right. That cop who knew about his gang and who was following Rei passed by a frustrated Yaadi and signalled him to be careful as more cops were coming. It is the gang that was being smoked out. He had to be extremely careful.

In a few minutes, Mathare had been surrounded by armed police. Nobody there moved. Many people choked on smoke in their houses without daring to cough. They rolled on the ground as if they were sick and coughed with their faces to the ground which stunk of urine.

But now Rei and Wairi were far away. Rei consoled Wairi. He kissed her forehead. She was crowned with pain. He soothed the palms of her hands. Yaadi had driven holes into them. He massaged the wounds in her feet; they too had holes in them. He knew how deeply pierced her heart was. He knew it was more deeply pierced than by seven swords. He knew and he had seen that she bled water and blood. He knew she had more than the six wounds of Jesus. She bore Seven wounds for she had been mutilated in the holiest part of her body and spat upon. For all the new churches that came up in Kenya and in the world, none had been built for women, but maybe there was no need for one as women were in all of them and in the church of their bodies. Yaadi had never seen Wairi riding on his donkey, how could he have known who he

lived with? Rei stared at her in his soul. He took off the cross from his cassock and set it aside. He stared at it, at her, and looked down at his chest, for a long time.

He felt his heart swell with pride. But for some reason he could not explain why his conscience berated him. His heart and mind were in confusion. His head told him he must never leave her, his heart pinched him for having gone too far. He went through her dispensary papers. Wairi would not be able to open her eyes wide for many days. Rei was even more confused when *she* said that in her little bag she had a Kenyan passport. She had bribed her way into finally acquiring it. Suddenly his mind and heart became one with regard to Wairi. He was certain of what he had to do. He resolved to change her life. He was going to take her to a safe place. His conscience was restless. Surely Afrika could not be saved by her children being taken out of her? He felt terrible to think that the taxi drivers would tell the story of how he took her with him and that more girls would believe that there is salvation in going to Europe and other continents. But he could not ignore Wairi's case. She had become part of his life in a mysterious way.

He dialed Rika immediately.

"Yes, I know, it is a little earlier than we agreed but this is urgent. Come over as fast as you can!"

Rika had put down her cup of coffee and looked into Lulu's surprised face.

"It is fine. I understand. Work is work. I know the nature of your work, Rika, bye!"

Rika arrived promptly at The Gama. They had just talked about Rei's love for adventure. If she had known of his last days in town, she would have surprised herself! They had laughed at the coincidence of Rei sharing a name with Lulu's late husband.

Suddenly, she panicked about Rei Burke. She knew he was unstoppable and was in deep trouble. She knew at once that something dangerous had happened. It was in his voice. She wondered what it

could be and she knew it was nothing she could ask about on the telephone.

He called again, and spoke as if he was almost choking. When Rika got there she listened without saying a word for a few minutes.

“All right! All right Rei! But please come back to your senses!” Rika said. “She needs at least an invitation letter; police on the other end have to send an electronic document of approval. She needs a couple more days at most before my case can be heard by the embassy who must get to know nothing about your research with the Sabasaba Defence! Maybe my friend Lulu can hide her in Kitale for some days to give us time to think. But she can only fly there, she is too weak to be on the roads for long! Rei, most Europeans do not need visas to visit most of Africa and even Asia, but it is not the same for us. We can hardly go anywhere without being investigated much. We have our villages, you have the global one! We have to redeem ourselves. Wairi and I may look weak and also all the women, but we know we can make things work if we want to, we need to be here!”

Rika promised Rei she would take care of Wairi secretly in her own house. Rei had sent an urgent sms to a friend. A letter was faxed to Rei inviting Wairi to Geneva for medical reasons. He told Rika that if it worked, it would only be for some months and Wairi would fly back from Geneva to Eldoret and go onward to Kitale. He gave the fax to Rika. He knew she would start the process fast. Rei and Rika bade each other a long goodbye in words and a quick hug, promising to keep in touch. Finally he was leaving. Rika felt her tears surging to her eyes but she knew she needed her eyes dry.

Wairi left with Rika in a taxi which Rei called. He paid it up. Wairi slept all the way and all night as the drugs had taken effect. Rika could not believe how intense the last week had been. She did not know why, but looking at Wairi's body in her bed, she felt a deep power surge in her somewhere below her left breast. It was not painful. She could not lose hope. Here was a deep realization that she could carry on.

A last drink

Rei checked out and went to have a drink in the place where he first met Wairi to discuss the gang. So many things had happened that Lucinda's call was more of a bother to him. As he puffed along, three girls came over to him. He recognized them as Wairi's friends just before he called a cab. These are the girls who had accompanied him to the Nairobi National Park. He had told Fundi to go home as the day had been too hectic promising him to be back in Nairobi in less than three months. He felt lonely without Fundi and since the girls whom he told he was leaving suggested accompanying him, he agreed remembering they were going to have a long, long night in the cold. The cab driver opened the boot and threw in Rei's small case there. Rei sat in the front seat with his small bag strapped on his shoulder. He did not mention Wairi. He had learnt to be on the safe side. The girls were eager for a ride to the airport. They got into the back seat of the cab. It was early. They left at 7.45 for Rei's midnight flight. He heard these compelling words and they came with a tone that would probably work well. He needed to start putting down some words. He knew he had to write tonight. He thought he would also have a nap at the airport while waiting. Perhaps he could use some time surfing if his connection worked.

The girls were laughing cheekily. They filled the cab with life. They spoke to the taxi driver in a language Rei had not heard before. They said they were telling him why they preferred to marry their men at home rather than be married to *jungus*. They were not bashful about it. They said some of their girlfriends did marry *jungus* but none of them ever married *the other*. They insisted that they preferred to marry their men at home but that those who got chances outside were lucky. These were very hard times in the world and they knew some of their friends had gone to Europe and been turned into sex slaves. They continued joking about preferred figures by looks and race with much

ease. All at once, their laughter stopped like a banged iron door. The taxi came to an abrupt halt and Rei could not tell how he got into the boot of the car but he was there breathing hard and curled like his own luggage. He could feel his laptop against his heart. When the boot was finally snapped open after a fifteen minute long and rough ride, he was in agony. There were no girls in the car, only a very scared driver whose face he did not even have a chance to see. He was forced out and straight into handcuffs. He was dizzy, shocked and very perplexed.

The chink of the handcuffs sounded like a final sentence on his life. How would he reach Rika? Were those girls so cruel? Where were they now? He was being shoved to move to a dark blue building with a black wide strip at the bottom touching the ground. He tried to turn and estimate the gate but he was forced to look ahead roughly. Had it come to this? Did he have to be put in the boot of a car to be arrested? He was now being pulled by the waist band of his underwear and he felt his boxers fall lower. He felt his jeans slipping down too. The police kept him down and pushed him into the station. Whenever he tried to get upright, they pulled him down again. He was now crouching. He was very thirsty and dizzy.

“Rei Burrrrrkeee!” a loud voice rang out.

He attempted to stand up but he could not.

“Take off one shoe!”

“You are booked in the Occurence Book, the OB.

He had to consent to what was filled in Form C8 quickly he was told.

Blue eyes. Brownish white skin. Tawny brown hair. Male. Speaks English. England. London. Young. 6.3 ft. He was finally described in words as a young white male national of England! He tried to intervene but he was told to shut up.

His handcuffs were taken off as two policemen guarded him. *He rolled his Rolex watch, he took out his phone and gave both in. He was asked for money.* He handed in his 250\$ and his laptop. He was told

they would be safely put away and they were registered. He believed it. His passport was also put in the safe. He thought it was hopeless to mention his flight and ticket. He was afraid that this might lead to an immediate execution.

“This is a serious offence. Trafficking girls and drugs in Nairobi!” the same loud voice blared. Rei was guarded as if he was going to try and escape. He knew he was not his own man anymore. He hesitated but he was dragged and thrown onto the floor of a dark cell. He fell on his knees. Immediately, some inmates came running up to him as if they were his friends. “*Werlokamu!*” he heard one say very close to his ears as he passed the palms of his hands all over Rei’s chest. Other hands were also feeling his cotton vest inside his shirt in no time. There were fingers opening his suede jacket pockets and others pushing him up from the back pockets of his trousers. He was now pushing his chest up and bending back and pushing his back up forward. He was curving almost into a bracket in his stomach area. He was unbalanced. What do they want.. he wondered. Some were already feeling his seams all along his trousers. They were more thorough than lice and fleas inside his clothes. They were worse than jiggers in the flesh. He now leaned forward and his butts were sticking out. His belt was loosened. They checked him inside his boxers right down. One of them came as if to shake his hands so he stood upright but this man quickly squeezed him under in his pants as if to size him up! This jolted him to quick realization. The image of the cop who always used to stare at him loomed large on his mind. This was not about the girls. It was what he knew about the Sabasaba Defence Force. How would he get out of this?

Some girls were watching from a corner and giggling. These were special girlfriends of the police. They were usually arrested when they needed shelter or a few days in, or even a meal. They were never thrown into the regular women’s cells. The police bosses did not walk into the cells daily as that was the work of junior police. They sat in their big offices facing big flower bouquets. The junior police who often felt as if

they were prisoners found their moments of 'fun' with girls in the cells. They arrested 'nice' ones, they said... the ones who could talk to them 'nicely' and obey. These girls were powerful in the cells. They kept their phones. They could ask for anything. Some of them helped some real inmates to phone their mothers, uncles or brothers and sisters to say they were arrested.

"By the way, *ni yule jungu..babaye.. buda..yule..* it is that guy.. that man who you. .. She was laughing."

"I think Rei is in trouble. Take this call," Wairi said to Rika who had just entered her room with a glass of milk and her medicine. It was 9pm.

The phone went off. Rika called back. She listened to the story calmly but also feeling as if she had just got on a rocket and found herself shooting to the moon. In just over fifteen minutes, Rika had called all the people whose support she needed and she was at the Area Police Station. A tall man walked in with her.

The cop had not actually booked Rei's offence yet. He was sitting there with a rough paper with details about drugs and trafficking which he had not yet entered into the OB. It could not get worse. Rika knew all this meant Rei could be disappeared. They feared what he knew and his intentions. Rika saw the cop and recognized him. She knew that he badly wanted to have Rei behind the bars and then perhaps beat him until he died, or shoot him. He could always argue he triggered it off 'by mistake' in the cells.

The gang was more important than Rei and Rei knew too much about the Sabasaba Defence Force. No one could guarantee how much of that he would tell the world. Rika remembered all the terrible things that had happened to journalists she knew who had reported on police corruption. She wondered what to do. In those moments of silence, her mind moved fast. An article she had read on the internet rolled before her eyes just as she had seen it then:

Kenya: Journalist murdered following police threats

“PEN is shocked by the murder of W Citizen journalist Francis N. According to our information, Francis disappeared on 15 January 2009, and his decapitated body was found on 29 January. PEN is deeply concerned by reports that, prior to his death, Francis was threatened by local police officers following publication of articles revealing police malpractice. We are calling on the Kenyan authorities to conduct a full and impartial investigation into Francis’s murder as a matter of urgency and to ensure the perpetrators are brought to justice.

The following is an alert issued by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) on 30 January 2009: New York, January 30, 2009—Reporter Francis N was found decapitated and with his hands bound on Thursday [29 January 2009] in a forest in western Kenya. Francis, who wrote for the private W Citizen under a pen name had been missing since January 15, according to local journalists and relatives.”We send our deepest sympathies to....”

All the details were in her memory so clear in her mind. Rika felt sick. Rika could not have much support even from powerful politicians she had interviewed. Word had gone round that she knew everything behind the glittering faces on TV screens. They said she knew more than the Kenyan Intelligence put together and that she was dangerous. The worst thing about her, they said, is that she could not be bribed. She did not care for big *cars or* diamonds. They also knew she worked very well and that in these days of internet, all were well connected to others who fought for justice. Rika had tipped a human rights lawyer that she felt insecure. She also told him that she feared for Rei since the day he was arrested near the Jewish Synagogue in the city.

The lawyer was at her side in no time. Babs suddenly appeared beside her wearing his suspenders on his striped trousers. He had reached home, changed and gone for a drink with friends. He was wearing open black car tyre sandals. He had not had time to change into his usual sneakers. His camera straps hang on his shoulders. He carried a

cam recorder too. All these were forbidden in the police station, but even without using them, they seemed to irritate the police. Machine power. They knew Rika, the lawyer with her and Bab's powerful photographs. Lulu came running with the marriage certificate still in a glass frame as it hang in her shop.

"DCIO Sir, I have this marriage certificate to show you that this is my husband's brother who had come on a short visit. Besides, please call the Crime Office and let me speak to him!" Very calmly, the lawyer stepped forward. "I notice my client's offence is not in the OB and he is in the cells. This is wrong. You know it is." There was a silent pause.

"If you are going to book my client Sir, you will need to explain first, why this has happened." lawyer Dube added.

"Are you ready to proceed, with this evidence against you, Bwana OCS? Ask your officer why he has arrested my client. Explain to the D.C.I.O my concern. Ask him in what circumstances the same policeman who had arrested Rej, tried to book him at the Seen All Police Station less than two days ago."

"I have no problem. If my boss says so, I will follow. We take orders."

"You know Rika, the mighty do all these terrible things: trafficking, drug dealing, money laundering, prostitution, domestic violence, rape.. but you see the law comes from above! Every time you find writers are not free...no matter where they come from, you know the problem.. you know it. You know the top stinks!" Dube spoke in a hushed tone to Rika but was very loud and firm, when he addressed the police.

The phone was through and the Provincial Officer spoke fast.

"Yes, sir!" answered the Officer.

"Nationality?"

"Yes, Sir, the passport is Swiss, not British."

"Profession?"

"Alternative and Social Media Developer. Writer and Journalists!"

"Weeee! *Hio ni kali! Sio ile ya hapa tuna shika shika!!*"

He had switched to Kiswahili abruptly to exclaim literally that this type was too hot, not like our own that we arrest easily.

Yes, Sir, he has all those documents! Yessa!”

“It is by the order of the Provincial Crime Investigating Officer, The PCIO, that I arrested you and by his orders I release you. He never has to show me which criminal to arrest but I do my work for him. He is coming to have further discussions with you!” Said the OCS.

Your ‘criminal’ is released!” Said a policeman, handcuffing the officer who had arrested Rei.

Turning to Rika and Dube, the OCS said:

“He is free. He may proceed straight to the Airport. Conversations intercepted by another officer prove that the plot to have four girls in his cars had been hatched by the arrested officer. We have a difficult security situation in the country and have no time to waste. Some of us maybe rotten but there are still some good potatoes among us. *Mchukue*. Take him.”

A *matatu* swung into the police station with the music still playing just as they were leaving. From inside the cell a voice echoed it.. “They won’t build schools anymore! All they will build is prison, prison.. am a prisoner!”

Rei had a chance to clean himself up at hotel Pana on the way to the airport. He now felt natural bodily warmth as he had almost frozen with shock. He now gave Rika a long, long and warm hug. He could not believe he was still catching his flight. In a few minutes they were at the airport.

There was hardly a minute to lose before check in. Rei’s heart and mind were invaded by Rika’s power with others. His heart glowed with happiness. A new confidence that Rika would understand his gratitude welled up within him. He hugged her again and felt her soft skin again. He hugged her again.

“Promise you will read my book. Promise you will keep in touch?” said Rei.

“I will. And I will look after Wairi and do what is best for her!” She said. The two held each others shoulders and Rika pulled him close to her chest again.

He looked at her and shouted, "You are awesome!"

He knew in this instance that this was only a beginning. Back in her room in Rika's house, Wairi was on her knees praying. Her heart was crowded with images of the hero of her life. Rika texted Wajibu and told her to tell Wairi that Rei was safe so that she could sleep. Her heart was soft and filled with pain and joy.

Starting

Rei still had time to feel the urge to start on his novel on the Sabasaba Defence Force. He thought that Wairi in her days abroad, would make it easier for him to complete it. Rika would be its first reader before it went to press. He wondered what was in store for all of them; but he knew they would all be back together someday, somehow.

Many images flashed through his mind. He even remembered the young man who read a Reader's Digest in the back streets of Nairobi. The struggle for life and meaning breathed out of every little grain of soil, every tree, and river; every rock and each grain of sand on the beaches of Kenya.

Out of the peoples eyes, fingers and minds was a fast pulsating determination; a heart beat for great love and growth, not just survival. Kenyans were brimming with the desire to live and be victorious. He felt sad about it but also sorry for the comfortable people he remembered in other capitals who had got tired of following what was happening in the rest of the world. They seemed too dull and so dead. Dead souls.

He did not look forward to the usual small conversations about the weather at home. Small conversations about what was so important in their lives bored him and yet they were important if he was to live in Europe happily. He felt that people around him in the so called developed nations could never engage life as much as those who lived daily facing the line between life and death. Lucinda faded into one more westerner

He looked at her and shouted, "You are awesome!"

He knew in this instance that this was only a beginning. Back in her room in Rika's house, Wairi was on her knees praying. Her heart was crowded with images of the hero of her life. Rika texted Wajibu and told her to tell Wairi that Rei was safe so that she could sleep. Her heart was soft and filled with pain and joy.

Starting

Rei still had time to feel the urge to start on his novel on the Sabasaba Defence Force. He thought that Wairi in her days abroad, would make it easier for him to complete it. Rika would be its first reader before it went to press. He wondered what was in store for all of them; but he knew they would all be back together someday, somehow.

Many images flashed through his mind. He even remembered the young man who read a Reader's Digest in the back streets of Nairobi. The struggle for life and meaning breathed out of every little grain of soil, every tree, and river; every rock and each grain of sand on the beaches of Kenya.

Out of the peoples eyes, fingers and minds was a fast pulsating determination; a heart beat for great love and growth, not just survival. Kenyans were brimming with the desire to live and be victorious. He felt sad about it but also sorry for the comfortable people he remembered in other capitals who had got tired of following what was happening in the rest of the world. They seemed too dull and so dead. Dead souls.

He did not look forward to the usual small conversations about the weather at home. Small conversations about what was so important in their lives bored him and yet they were important if he was to live in Europe happily. He felt that people around him in the so called developed nations could never engage life as much as those who lived daily facing the line between life and death. Lucinda faded into one more westerner

in the crowd. Passion that overflows into any work was alien to her. He remembered her crochet needles and the comfortable ponchos she made every Christmas for her nieces and felt sick.

He hit his seat on the plane. Somewhere, deep in his heart, he could hear Lake Turkana calling him back to celebrate life in Kenya! Rei had found his real home there, and in the world, but change was needed even for Rika to continue living how she did. Could they build bridges together, he wondered.

From now on Kenya even when he was away in Europe, would always have a special place in his heart. He was interested in Kiswahili. The voice of flight attendant came through on the mike, *"Mabibi na mabwana, mmekaribishwa katika ndege hii ya aina..."* Somehow this language sounded familiar now. But that was all Rei heard. A flight attendant tapped his shoulder and made a sign that he had to sit upright for the landing. He was in Geneva. The trill of his phone woke him up again on the bus home. It was Lucinda calling. He just stared at it a second and then switched it off. He wanted to be kind to her but he knew he needed to sleep for another day before he could focus. He rushed straight into his bed. He switched off his door bell, his mobile phone and his computer for two days.

The Book at the Seventh gate

Rika lay on her bed fast asleep. Her mind worked deep in her sleep. Faces of women wearing beads and wonderful traditional clothes filled the Kenya7 Broadcasting Television screen that Rika stared at. A few of them wore sacks. They looked very powerful. There were millions of women all out with one purpose. They stood at every *gate in the city and in the country*.

They knew that the 7th gate was the door of all great media and a special book. They loved all books. It was not possible to find the seventh

in the crowd. Passion that overflows into any work was alien to her. He remembered her crochet needles and the comfortable ponchos she made every Christmas for her nieces and felt sick.

He hit his seat on the plane. Somewhere, deep in his heart, he could hear Lake Turkana calling him back to celebrate life in Kenya! Rei had found his real home there, and in the world, but change was needed even for Rika to continue living how she did. Could they build bridges together, he wondered.

From now on Kenya even when he was away in Europe, would always have a special place in his heart. He was interested in Kiswahili. The voice of flight attendant came through on the mike, *"Mabibi na mabwana, mmekaribishwa katika ndege hii ya aina..."* Somehow this language sounded familiar now. But that was all Rei heard. A flight attendant tapped his shoulder and made a sign that he had to sit upright for the landing. He was in Geneva. The trill of his phone woke him up again on the bus home. It was Lucinda calling. He just stared at it a second and then switched it off. He wanted to be kind to her but he knew he needed to sleep for another day before he could focus. He rushed straight into his bed. He switched off his door bell, his mobile phone and his computer for two days.

The Book at the Seventh gate

Rika lay on her bed fast asleep. Her mind worked deep in her sleep. Faces of women wearing beads and wonderful traditional clothes filled the Kenya7 Broadcasting Television screen that Rika stared at. A few of them wore sacks. They looked very powerful. There were millions of women all out with one purpose. They stood at every *gate in the city and in the country*.

They knew that the 7th gate was the door of all great media and a special book. They loved all books. It was not possible to find the seventh

gate always in one book. One found small parts of that gate in any book. One woman found the hinges of the gate in one book, and another the keys or the upper frame. There was a small replica of the special book in every book or media that could liberate one a little.

These women searched. These women had refused to abandon their faith in justice. They stood by the women in the Nanyuki strike. They stood with the people who lived in camps as refugees in their own homes. The TV shone bright lights on the words Internally Displaced Persons. These words began to be seen on every light that was switched on in Kenya. It was even around the little one wick tin lamps that they called *koroboi* in every village Rika knew. The women she saw were filled with a spirituality that embraced everything. In her dream, love poured out of every pore they had.

She saw a small ebony dark woman stood with her arms raised like a locust's legs when the insect is ready to fly. She stuck out her chin and faced the *bling -bling* men as her dreadlocks fell behind her ears. The men and she were on a street in Nairobi near the Hilton Hotel. She told them to leave Kenya and never return. Everyone clapped for her but she was alone.

Another woman *all on her own stood up to snakes that bared their fangs and crushed them.* She now held the hands of the other women. Together they held up a new book. They said it was a new covenant. It was thin and clear to read, full of light. The New Constitution, was its title. The woman in blue was back again and she clicked, clicked her camera to capture that scene forever.

Encouraged by the power of her people's image and not her own, the first determined woman to stand up crushed the snake of the upperworld into smithereens; and the snake of the underworld turned into beads of many colors, the beads and the tiny pieces of the other upperworld snake went down in the valley like a river. Down below, they found another woman who turned this liquid substance into water with the power of words. It was water that all could drink.

New

Again a small ebony dark woman stood with her arms back and raised like a locust's legs when the insect is ready to fly. She stuck out her chin and faced the *bling -bling* men as her dreadlocks fell behind her ears. The men and she were on a street in Nairobi near the Hilton Hotel. She told them to leave Kenya and never return. Everyone clapped for her but she was alone.

There was a new dance to learn and new clothes and beads to wear. Even snakes at the Snake Park in Nairobi looked like new, happy and natural snakes. The women wore their happy clothes everywhere. They wore them in their: ears, noses, toes, fingers, necks, thighs and waists, they wore their happy beads like nobody else does all over the world.

Women were dancing the dance of power and the women were not dancing for anyone but for themselves. It was as if they were celebrating a great wedding in their simple clothes and beads. Their daughters and sons were celebrating in nursery schools, primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and universities. The feast was fantastic in all the schools in the slums. Everyone respected their daughters and sons.

The TV showed another woman who spoke Kiswahili in unique accent joining others and talk about the bad snakes and the *Lukiimam*. She said her name was *Ndi nyina wa Jambo*- I am the mother of News. Jambo means 'the word' a Rwandese language. She was also dressed in blue. She used her own hand to chase the *Lukiimam* away telling them that Kenya was new now. She, however insisted that those who stole needed to be tried. She said they had to make retribution as all faiths. Human faith required that. She said that in her country she had seen if people did not make up for their mistakes and beg for forgiveness, nothing changed. She said those who killed had to be tried and punished if found guilty.

She said the important people who feasted openly in hotels had to be tried urgently first.

She finished by singing a little song. In her song she said that not a single cell of any person, even a child's would be left unpaid for. She said the payment was not in money but in justice that is greater than money and all of us. She said in her country also militia men had changed. She said they were almost always the young men who loved their country but were misled.

Many could not tolerate to listen to her song when she repeated biblical words that all blood, even that of the unknown still cried from the ground. Some people suggested she be forced into silence but she went on.

Again a small ebony dark woman stood with her arms back and raised like a locust's legs when the insect is ready to fly. She stuck out her chin and faced the *bling -bling* as her dreadlocks fell behind her ears. The men and she were on a street in Nairobi near the Hilton Hotel. She told them to leave Kenya and never return. She did her act as if in a boxing ring and alone with her enemies but the crowd outside cheered her on. Everyone clapped for her but she was alone.

Suddenly all the women and men from Nanyuki poured into the ring as the *Lukiimam* and many other killers begged for mercy. The women in sacks were especially angry about those children whose mothers were murdered and their children raped everywhere in the country: Elgon, Nyanjiru & Thuku Hotel, Kirinyaga, Naivasha, Kayole, Kiambu, Dandora, near the Not- so- Serene Uhuru Chains Hotel, Nyanjiru- Mekatilili Hall, Berga-a –Gold, Awinja Safari Star Hotel, Grande Corruption Conspiracy, Freedom Corner, The State Office of Security and other ministry offices as well as police cells everywhere in the country. She cursed whoever tried to stop her. People joined her. The women who worked at night in the streets came in and the rural women arrived with all sorts of implements in their hands singing like

warriors. They said that their machetes cultivated food not war, but that no one could cultivate food without security.

They repeated many times that “war is not porridge”, a proverb they loved.

The main woman in the ring announced that her name was Sankara- Nyerere- Mandela. She put the president and his cabinet on notice frightening them to the core. Peaceful women, she told them, did not mean foolish women. They had to ‘fight’ she reminded them if everyday they were fought.

Rika saw another woman appear. She carried Wairi on her own back running down the former Slip Road which still had a temporary name board ‘Me Katilili wa Menza Road’. At the junction with Harry Thuku Road where a blue bank had built its offices stood a wonderful statue to the memory of Nyanjiru and Mekatilili holding hands with Kit Mikayi. Kit Mikayi wept for her children in jails and police stations. The Big Man said he wanted to see her on video and listen to her message for he was now afraid. His own mother and sisters had been raped in the bush. His brother had been sodomized many times.

This powerful woman held up and tore group photos of the cabinet ministers meetings in State House. She tore up many other photos including those of Maya and her Mother. She summoned the powerful woman who had gone back to her trade and tore up her photos too. It is said that she made her cough up her diamond studs and she made her give their money’s worth to the poor. The powerful woman’s spirit is now heard crying about power many times. Her spirit walks the streets of Nairobi. People say it is a mad woman who cries and that she wears a gray coat. They say this woman speaks to herself but she is always shouting at the spirit of the rich woman. She shouts out the name of the powerful woman which the powerful woman’s ghost does not recognize any more. She shames all corrupt women.

Rika turned left in her dream. She saw that the seven gates of the city and of the country were guarded by women who made State House

into a homely hut. She heard many soprano voices say 'La!' and Ndio' in Parliament and the Senate in Nairobi. These were voices of humble women leading the night. Some of them wore Krobbo recycled beads and the others were asking how Ghanians make those beads out of dangerous glass. There were more voices than these in the district parliaments. It was easy now for women to lead the night not just on Koinange Street, markets and hair salons but in institutions, at the University, in the media and even at St. Paul's Catholic Church where women ministered 24/7, near the Synagogue.

Women too had powerful cars now and theirs were often driven into the slums with emergency kits. Now there was no vision outside of Kenya only in some minds, the vision had become Kenya. It was inside fishes that swam from rivers to lakes. It had been sown and seeds of maize and beans on fertile ground grew. Wheat was budding in the North, East, South and West. It came to the city in sheaves and flew out.

The North had flowered in the hands of the woman who was first to touch the steering wheel and drive from Wajir to Kitale. She had blazed the trail. Now she was meeting every woman circumciser on TV and chatting with them about freedom. In the dream, some men asked how and why all this was happening. Where were all the men who were supposed to lead, they asked. They were told that those men were busy ushering in women to positions of power. Many men were busy working in many other places. First, they were guided to examine the mystery of justice. They stood in front of the statue of a nude boy outside the Nairobi Law Courts and sang in praise of justice *that* knew no fear or favor. Rika saw many young men in dreadlocks crying in groups here. They gave tobacco to old men and cried saying the old should sniff it. They poured out strong lethal brews in the ground. They asked old men if they could have a horn of traditional brews. Some were given straws and shown a common pot to sip from. They sat in great discipline.

There were many men dressed in ordinary suits. They did not wear *bling- blings*. They thanked men for working so hard in farms, markets, in public transport, schools, universities, sweeping streets, running companies, being doctors and engineers and so many things for so many years in history. They thanked some of them for continuing to work and for not peeing everywhere where there was no one watching in the villages. They thanked those fathers who discussed rape and domestic violence with their sons and told them openly that they had cursed it. They thanked men who reminded all that our freedom was won with blood and sacrifice and that sacrifice as shown by old women who stripped naked at Freedom Corner for the release of their sons from jail is never complete until each one puts in their part. They thanked those men who did not beat up their children and wives. Those who did not rape little girls and grandmothers were applauded. Those who had committed such crimes had to listen to how man curses himself and his offspring forever. They sang the song of Deni all over again. Real men of the country shamed the Lukiimam.

Rika felt relaxed. In the distance she heard Oliver Mtukudzi singing away with Wainaina, “*Twende, twende... twende... zunguka, zunguka.. zunguzuka weee!*” Let’s go, let’s go... turn around... turn... It was a marvelous dream. All men stood up against evils that had plagued women for many years!

Wake up Mama!

When Rika awoke she found Uhai and Hariri each holding one of her hands; massaging them and laughing cheekily. She said to them, “It is time to start working!” The children beamed like a superb sunrise and sang together: “Hongeraaaaa!”

“What are you doing?” Rika held them and asked. “How did you know about last night?”

There were many men dressed in ordinary suits. They did not wear *bling- blings*. They thanked men for working so hard in farms, markets, in public transport, schools, universities, sweeping streets, running companies, being doctors and engineers and so many things for so many years in history. They thanked some of them for continuing to work and for not peeing everywhere where there was no one watching in the villages. They thanked those fathers who discussed rape and domestic violence with their sons and told them openly that they had cursed it. They thanked men who reminded all that our freedom was won with blood and sacrifice and that sacrifice as shown by old women who stripped naked at Freedom Corner for the release of their sons from jail is never complete until each one puts in their part. They thanked those men who did not beat up their children and wives. Those who did not rape little girls and grandmothers were applauded. Those who had committed such crimes had to listen to how man curses himself and his offspring forever. They sang the song of Deni all over again. Real men of the country shamed the Lukiimam.

Rika felt relaxed. In the distance she heard Oliver Mtukudzi singing away with Wainaina, “*Twende, twende... twende... zunguka, zunguka.. zunguzuka weee!*” Let’s go, let’s go... turn around... turn... It was a marvelous dream. All men stood up against evils that had plagued women for many years!

Wake up Mama!

When Rika awoke she found Uhai and Hariri each holding one of her hands; massaging them and laughing cheekily. She said to them, “It is time to start working!” The children beamed like a superb sunrise and sang together: “Hongeraaaaa!”

“What are you doing?” Rika held them and asked. “How did you know about last night?”

“No Mama! Congratulations Mamaaa! Your friend Lulu called us early in the morning and told us not to wake you up. She said she had seen something in the news about you.

“A book you wrote without your name is tops!”

“What?” She asked. Lulu must have entered it into a competition herself. “I forgot all about my small book! Are you sure? Rika knew that she certainly needed good news. But on her mind now was Wairi and her future, the future of this Kenya that she loved so much. Her phone started up.. blue and silvery light shone and smiled on it and then it sang cuuushhhhhh.....

“Do I start with congratulations or with thank you or both?” Asked Rei. “And what a strange coincidence that the Mandela Literary Award ceremony is in Geneva followed by a trip to Soweto in Johannesburg with Winnie and Graca!” He continued.

“What am reading here is more impressive. *Long Road to Freedom* has been voted compulsory reading for all people in leadership in Kenya, youth, old men and women. People in Parliament and the Senate are going to be getting homework! They have to learn lines from a play titled, *Betrayal in the City* by Francis Imbuga, and be tested on it, before going to lead us! We shall read it later in school and watch Members of Parliament performing it!

“What?”

“It is a dream. We already have what we dream about, I think. Perhaps we do not need any awards at all!” Rika said. The Afrikan beauty masks on her wall seemed to dance and smile.

That morning, the sun rose before the moon set and the two reigned in the skies before the sun heat up the day and the people stopped looking up to see the moon. All the stars are up in the sky all the time, season come and season go; there will be no lasting night in day.

* * * * *



Leading the Night

Philo Ikonya

Deprived of being heard, people still have a voice. They make it heard in ways that disturb the status quo. This book is an engagement with such voices. Can Deni, Wairi, Yaadi, matatu people, militia people and taxi drivers in Kenya also ask “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?” as Nelson Mandela did.

Why do two men wearing *bling blings* turn into two snakes dancing in Rika’s imagination? The web of corruption is intricate. No-one can lead this night alone. It takes many constellations, each one twinkling in its own radius. Many rays of light dispel darkness. The peoples’ good leadership alone can check politicians’ terrible ways.

Philo Ikonya is the author of two poetry anthologies *This Bread of Peace* (2010, Lapwing, Belfast), *Out of Prison* love songs (2010, Loecker, Austria).

“Philo Ikonya looks unflinchingly at the horrors of poverty and violence. She brings the voices of their survivors into the spaces where powerful elites gather. She refuses silence and rejects simplification.”
— Shailja Patel, author of *Migritude*.

